

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 1: Prologue, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

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Prologue

Third in the series of stories which begins with 74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were, continues with Catching Fire: Rekindling (There are missing scenes for those of you that like rated M versions of things called Catching Fire: Rekindling Outtakes) and now the final story is being told.

In this version of Mockingjay: Broken Wings I will be following my own timeline, not the one provided in the book. Let's chalk it up to artistic licensing. I cannot promise to update four times a week, but you will get at least one update a week and I will shoot

for two. I rely on others to complete this story and believe it or not, we dedicate an enormous amount of time on these stories. My betas ROCK! S and A are the best EVER! BB, thanks for listening to me ramble during my sickness. I was a feverish nightmare. If you have questions about this story, please ask them on my tumblr page as I will not answer them here. [www dot jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://www.dotjamiesommers23.tumblr.com) if you follow me on tumblr you will get updates as to what is happening with the story and previews to new chapters. Please let me remind all of you that I am writing a K/P based fanfic. If something else stems from it, yay! If not, so sorry.

Thanks to all of you that have been following me since the very first story and anxiously awaiting this one. I hope you like it. BTW... please remember while reading my stories, I love to tug at your heartstrings and leave you hanging at the edge of your seats.

Welcome to the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

He couldn't drag his eyes away from the spot on his arm that had been sliced apart only days earlier. Now it was healed and the skin was a glowing, a shining statement of how powerful the Capitol really was. One second you're taking your last breath and the next you're lying in a hospital bed, every injury...knife wounds...paper cut, hell, Peeta was certain if he got a splinter while he was in the arena it had been removed and after the Capitol works their magic on you they don't just stick you in a bed and say, get better soon, no, they take it one step further. In Peeta's case they may have taken it several steps further. He'd had a body polish, they had done something to his teeth so they were gleaming white, something to his hair, Portia said they

didn't color it, but brought out his natural shades, his blonds looked a lot lighter and his browns a lot deeper. He wasn't sure what it was...he just didn't feel like himself. He began moving his fingers around, the two fingers that had caused him to lose his grip on the ladder. The feeling was back and would stay that way. The Capitol doctors had fixed it. They fixed everything. Peeta had wondered why they would do such a thing, repair him, and then they told him he would be doing an interview with Caesar Flickerman. 'Ah,' he had come to a conclusion, 'They want me to talk about how kind the Capitol was to me after rescuing me and so graciously saving my life...bastards.' He walked around the familiar quarters at the Tribute Center, Peacekeepers standing guard at the elevators and the doorway to the rooftop. Peeta walked into the bedroom Katniss always used, the one they had shared prior to entering the arena, and closed the door. He walked into the bathroom, sat at the edge of the tub and ran his fingers around the cool, smooth surface as he thought about their time together. 'Why didn't we leave? Why were we so stupid? Why was I so stupid?' "God!" He stood up and knocked over one of the bottles of oil that was left on a small shelf. 'I should have told you the moment I found out about that damn tunnel, but...' Peeta did everything in his power to push the tears back as he lay on his side of the bed, '...but your answer to everything back then was to run and I was so afraid you'd leave without me.'

They were shocked to see their friends from the Capitol show up the morning after they got married. Any other morning they would've been thrilled to be greeted with such a surprise, but on that particular morning...it was pure hell sitting in Katniss' living room with a group of people from the Capitol, sipping tea, nibbling on cookies and not thinking about everything that had transpired between them in the past twenty-four hours.

"Excuse me," Katniss stood up with an empty plate in her hand and walked past Peeta into the kitchen. She glanced down at him once, but that one look was enough to tell him, 'get your butt in the kitchen. Now.'

Peeta got to his feet, bent down at the waist and spoke softly to Effie, "Pardon me, Effie. I'm going to check and see if Katniss needs some help in the kitchen."

"Nonsense," Effie looked at him as though he were insane. "We've brought attendants along with us, they shall take care of the chores." She was just about to lift her fingers and summon them.

"No!" Peeta snapped and Effie startled. "I mean, it's okay. I'll um...uh..." he let out a sigh and gave his surrogate mother the God's honest truth. "We want a few minutes alone together. Especially today."

Effie grinned at him and said, "Well, darling, of course you do." She checked the time and told him, "You've got ten minutes. I shall keep these vultures," she winked, "at bay."

"You're the best." Peeta gave her a quick peck on the cheek and sought out Katniss who was pacing back and forth by the side door. "Hey."

"Geez, what took you so long?" She grabbed his hand and yanked him out the door. "Come on. We're getting the hell out of here. These people are not ruining today for us."

Peeta let out a chuckle and let her lead him through the backyards of the unused mansions. "Where we going?"

"Don't know." She paused and turned to him. "Where do you want to go?"

"Hmm," he made a face, looked around then scooped her up and took her to the side of a house. "This one's got a tree."

"So what?"

"Wish I had a tree in my yard," Peeta sat at the base of it with her in his arms. "Think about it. We could have our very own oak tree in the backyard." He ran his hand down her shoulder, arm then clasped her hand. "Our very own picnic spot each day." He placed a kiss against her temple.

She let out a small sigh and relaxed against him. "A place for the birds to gather and nest. Maybe they'd sing."

"You could sing to them." Peeta closed his eyes soaking up everything about her. The way she smelled, the texture of her skin, the feeling of her lips as they continually pressed little kisses against his neck and chin. Those kisses were driving him crazy. "Katniss," he whispered to her and tilted his lips down to meet hers. "We don't have long before they try to find us."

One of her arms was wrapped around his back, her body was practically coiled around his, her other hand was behind his head, encouraging him, telling him it was okay to do this now and her mouth was against his talking in a low hushed tone that stirred every emotion of love he had ever felt for Katniss in his life. "I don't care if they do find us, Peeta. All I want right now is for you to kiss me. Just kiss me."

The look she had shimmering in her eyes was more than he could handle. How did he say no to his wife... 'Wow, she's my wife!' With that realization his lips collided with hers in a passionate kiss. He had her

shirt clenched in his fists, could feel her hands holding onto both sides of his face as she repositioned herself and straddled his lap, their lips never breaking their connection. The vibrations of the tiny sounds she made trembled against his bottom lip and caused his heart to swell. Peeta always knew he was in love with Katniss Everdeen, but being in love with Katniss Mellark was oh, so much better than he could have ever imagined. He allowed his hands to roam over her body and smiled between their kiss when he felt her reaction to his touch, but she got her sweet revenge by doing the same to him.

"Let's get out of here, Peeta," Katniss suggested against his lips as she pressed her upper body against his.

"Oh, God." He was so tempted to do what she asked. "Where would we go?"

"My house in the Seam. We could go there."

"Think they'd find us?" He asked ready to make a run for it regardless of the consequences. Effie Trinket would be furious with him not living up to his responsibilities.

"Who gives a shit?" Katniss attached herself to his lips with gusto. "Dear God, Peeta, today of all days, are we seriously expected to entertain the Capitol audience?"

She had a point. "Okay. Let's go, but they'll find us at your old house. I know a place they won't find us." They stumbled to their feet.

"Where?" Katniss dusted herself off.

"Our oak tree," Peeta grinned at her. "None of them will even think about that place."

"And we can go into our house so I can grab a couple of things to build a little shelter...like I did for Madge and Delly during the winter..." Katniss had a look of excitement in her eyes that Peeta hadn't seen since she went into the woods.

"What do you say? Feel like making a run for it?" Peeta held a hand out to her.

"What do you think?" She grabbed his hand.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"You can take that as a hell yes," she gave him a small smile.

They had made it all the way to their side door entrance, which was locked, Katniss secretly made her way into the house through a back window only to be caught by Haymitch who had been sent to look for them.

Peeta could hear the man talking to Katniss the second she entered their living room. "Something wrong with the front door sweetheart?"

"I hate doors." Peeta could almost see the scowl on Katniss' face when she answered.

"Where's the boy?"

Peeta stuck his head in the window and said, "Right here." He let out a loud sigh and lifted himself up until he was able to enter the same way Katniss had done. "How long have you guys been looking for us?" He put an arm around Katniss shoulder.

"Effie thought the two of you were in another portion of Katniss' place. I told her I'd come here and check. You're lucky I found you. If I hadn't they would've had to call in for the Peacekeepers to do a search.

"What?" Katniss and Peeta said in unison.

*"You two just don't get it." Their mentor's voice was filled with aggravation. "After all this time you still don't get it." Haymitch turned and walked towards the door. "You're victors...you belong to the Capitol, not yourselves. If you don't play their Games by their rules...there are consequences. Not just for yourselves either." He turned and pointed at them. "Think about **that** the next time you want to run off and have a little fling instead of fulfilling your Capitol duties."*

Peeta shared a concerned and guilty look with Katniss. They walked over to her house, did what they were told and gave each other a chaste goodbye kiss until Katniss mouthed, "Can we go to the tree tomorrow?"

Peeta took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly. "It's a date." One last kiss on the cheek. "See you later and try to have some fun."

Katniss' entire face morphed into one of disgust, "They're going to pluck me like a freaking chicken. Where's the fun in that?"

It was hard for Peeta not to smile when he thought of Katniss throughout the day. She hated going through prep, but she did it and she was stunning during too. He had to give her team credit, they sure knew their way around a makeup kit, but when it came right down to it, he much preferred her without all that crap on her face. Natural Katniss was the most beautiful creature he could ever imagine. 'Those freckles,' Peeta grinned when he thought about them dashed across her nose. 'I love them.'

"Perfect!" A man called out from across the room. "We're all done. Thank you."

Peeta just stood there in front of the backdrop thinking about Katniss...Katniss, once again he let out a sigh.

"Wow, you've got it bad." Portia ran her hand over his shoulder. "What do you say we get you out of these clothes, clear these people out of here and try and get you and Katniss back on your schedule instead of the two of you being on ours?"

Peeta nodded absently, a look of love plastered on his face, sheer adoration for the woman he married the day before magnified the vivid hue in his eyes. "What do we do first?" He was a work machine for Portia and Cinna, staying away from Katniss so as not to distract her from her shoot, but he could hear her yelling and complaining. He entered her home through the side door they had exited through earlier, removing three large empty trunks, that weighed a ton, and bringing them to Peeta's house to really empty them. Then there were Effie's trunks and Peeta's trunks. In total, eight trunks with false bottoms that held a remarkable amount of supplies.

"Have you dismissed everyone?" Effie walked into Peeta's home with a stiff spine, quite properly.

"Yes," Portia was tucking the last of the bedding into a trunk. "Effie how did you get these sleeping bags and pillows?"

She flapped her hands at Portia. "Oh, it was no big deal. The moment I found out about the house I gave Plutarch a what for," she pointed her finger as though she was currently scolding the man, "and he provided me with the name of a black market distributor. Well," she tugged on the hem of her jacket, "it's amazing what you can get from a black market sales person simply by supplying large sums of money to him. It seems that's really all they're interested in...that and trading for better goods, which I have," she picked up a jar of anti aging cream, "One of these got me fifty sleeping bags and pillows. I'm truly

disgusted at how vain the people of the Capitol are." She blew out a huff of air. "Oh well, pish posh. Their vanity is to our benefit." Effie walked up to Peeta and slid a key out of her glove. "There you are darling. Keep it somewhere safe...somewhere...away from you and Katniss. Definitely away from Haymitch. Perhaps hide it next to the house itself, but if you're searched for any reason and they come across this key, they will know after trying it, that it does not belong to your home."

"Who's home does it belong to, Effie?" Peeta asked.

"Has Portia not explained it to you yet?"

"No," Portia shook her head. "We've been a bit busy."

"Well, I must head back to Katniss and make sure we don't finish too early. Though that girl does have a tendency to drag things out," Effie grinned. "Oh, how I've missed the two of you. Still, I wouldn't want anyone to give in to her temperament too quickly." Effie addressed Portia. "I shall leave it up to you to explain. Everyone is either on the train or in Katniss' home. I have made it perfectly clear that I will leave them behind if they are not in their assigned place when it's time to leave."

Peeta let out a little laugh. "That should scare the hell out of them. Being left in District Twelve."

"Oh, darling," Effie turned and walked towards the door. "I find your district charming. All it needs is a little more...nourishment." With that she went to Katniss' house.

"Did Effie Trinket just compliment District Twelve?" Peeta turned to Portia with a look of disbelief on his face.

"Effie has changed, Peeta. The woman...you wouldn't believe what she did to Plutarch Heavensbee over that key you're holding." Portia bent down and took the handle on one side of a trunk. "Come on, we have to get this moved. I won't have time to take all three trunks...we'll probably have to dump some of this stuff out. Maybe you can get a hold of some boxes or something."

"My dad runs a bakery. I can get boxes."

"Great. You'll need them so you can pack up this stuff and put it into storage." Portia made a small grunting noise as she lifted the handle of the trunk.

"Want me to carry this myself?" Peeta asked.

"No, it's too heavy. We need to go out the back way." Portia began walking towards the side door. "This is the only other doorway, right?"

"Yeah...other than the one that leads off of our bedroom, but that just walks out to the balcony." Peeta answered.

"Okay, come on." Portia took Peeta to another mansion in Victor's Village. Once they were inside Peeta was shown the series in which to push the buttons inside of the workbench. It should have surprised him to see the shelving move to the side and reveal a staircase cut into the packed earth with wooden planks on each step, but after seeing the Capitol hideout, nothing came as a surprise to him anymore. "These tunnels were put in when the houses were built. It took awhile from what we gathered, after Effie..." Portia hemmed and hawed, "Well...we didn't get much more information out of Plutarch about the tunnels after Effie had her little dispute with him, but every district was supposed to have one put in. They don't all have one, but I believe most do."

Peeta took the trunk on his own and carried it down the steps, "Talk me down, will ya, Portia?" He stuck out a foot, tentatively reaching for the next step while following her voice. The moment he reached the bottom, hitting his head on the ceiling in the process, he asked, "Why did Effie fight with Plutarch?"

"We told him that you and Katniss wanted to run away right after the Victory Tour. He knew about Snow's plan to make you a co-host alongside of Caesar Flickerman and one day we were talking, Cinna, Effie and myself, about a way for you to escape...it was right before you and Gale were whipped, talking about a way for yours and Katniss' families to get out of Twelve. We thought if you could somehow make a break for it and get through the woods...make it to Thirteen on foot then you'd have..."

"Thirteen!?" Peeta interrupted. "It's real then?"

"Yes," Portia glanced over her shoulder, but continued talking and walking down the dimly lit tunnel holding onto the handle of the trunk. "It's real and the president there is very concerned about you and Katniss. Your survival is of the utmost importance to the rebellion, Peeta."

"Katniss told me Thirteen wasn't gone...it wasn't destroyed by the Capitol. We were going to ask Haymitch about it, but we sort of got sidetracked with the wedding and all."

"He wouldn't have admitted to it anyway." Portia adjusted the trunk. "It was only hours later that Effie came back all worked up. She had gotten the call from Haymitch about you getting whipped and let me tell you...I would never want to be on that woman's bad side when it came to hurting her babies."

"Her babies?" Peeta could feel himself blushing.

"She loves both you and Katniss, I'll admit that," Portia said, "but when it comes to you...I don't know what you and that woman share Peeta, but I've never seen anything like it. I mean...I've seen a mother's love, but Effie has seemed to take it one step further when it comes to you."

Now Peeta felt his cheeks burning, not with embarrassment, but flushed with the fact that Effie Trinket loved him as much as his own mother hated him. "So she had a fight with Plutarch?"

"Not a fight really," Portia grinned. "She got angry with him when he said, 'Perhaps I should have suggested they use the escape tunnel that led to the woods in District Twelve,' then...Oh, my!" Portia let out a high pitch laugh. "Effie walked slowly up to Plutarch and asked him, 'Do you mean there's a way Katniss and Peeta could've escaped that hellhole called Victor's Village?' and Plutarch kind of bristled a bit...he knew he had said too much, but there was no getting out of it at that point." Portia stopped walking. "I've got to set this down, it's so heavy. I just need a minute. Wish we had some water or something in here," she ran the back of her hand across her forehead and Peeta pulled out a few scraps of paper he had in his back pocket in case he saw something he wanted to sketch and handed it to her. "Thanks." She patted it across her brow. "Well, Plutarch had no choice but to tell us about this tunnel, admit that Haymitch had known about it for years..."

"He has?" Now this shocked Peeta. Haymitch was aware of the tunnel yet never told Peeta about it. Then again, Peeta always got the feeling that Haymitch would put the rebellion before he and Katniss so why should it come as a surprise. "Never mind," Peeta rolled his eyes. "Go on with your story."

"Haymitch has known about it for years." Portia went on. "The tunnel comes out deep enough into the woods that it's past the surveillance,

but not so far that you have to walk for hours and hours to get to safety. The storage area," Portia giggled, "is a rock."

"A rock?"

"The opening is a rock, beneath it is storage that was dug out by a small machine, similar to the tunnel itself, but none of these things are lined, just packed earth. Inside of the tunnel we should come across the actual machine that did the work." Portia stood up and took the handle of the trunk. "Let's see if we can find it. Apparently if it's still functioning it will sense whether or not the ground is unstable and begin repairs or start digging a new tunnel, and use this one to store the soil from the new one. Pretty ingenious isn't it?"

"Portia?" Peeta wiped the little bit of dirt out of his hair. "Can you please get to the part where Effie fights with Plutarch?"

"Sure," she smiled. "After Plutarch filled us in on the details Effie started doing that little walk of hers, you know the one...she did it when we were in the hideout before you proposed to Katniss. I think that's when she gets all of her genius ideas, and she started mumbling to herself about the two of you being safe long ago, how you would've never gotten hurt by the new Head Peacekeeper, Gale would've never gotten whipped, Katniss could finally sleep peacefully...work on having dreams like a girl of her age should, that both of you could battle your nightmares under a physician's care instead of having to keep it under wraps. I could see her working herself up into a little frenzy and the next thing I know she walked up to Plutarch and said, 'How many years have we known one another?' she started taking off her gloves, one finger at a time and Plutarch answered her by saying, 'We've known each other for too many years my dear friend.' Then Effie said, 'Do you consider me trustworthy?' And he answered, 'Why of course.' Then...I swear to you, never in my entire life did I see this coming and

I know that Plutarch Heavensbee didn't either. Effie Trinket took her right hand, made a proper little fist and socked the Head Gamemaker square in the nose. She made him bleed, Peeta." Portia started to laugh to which Peeta joined in.

"My God, I can just picture her doing that. I bet she checked her hand to make sure she didn't get any blood on herself and then put her gloves right back on too."

"Yes," Portia's laugh grew. "I know she must've hurt herself, but you'd never know it. That woman didn't flinch. She simply looked over her shoulder at Plutarch and said, 'I want the keys. Now!' and he practically ran to get them. He had them hiding somewhere in the passage between his house and the hideout. Then she started talking about stocking this place up, what we should get for it, supplies your families would need and what if it was more than just your families? What if there was a full on uprising? We'd need to stock you up with supplies for the people of your district. There was no way we could have enough for thousands, but a few hundred...children maybe...anything we could do to help." The humor was gone from Portia's story and the seriousness of the items they carried inside of the trunk now weighed even more.

Peeta had spent a few hours with Portia traveling back and forth with her, the last box of supplies was in fact stacked up against the wall, not having time to take them all the way down to the storage facility. He couldn't wait to tell Katniss about the area, she'd want to go see it right away, but it would be dangerous to go at night. 'Hmmm,' Peeta thought to himself. 'Maybe it would be best to wait until the next day.' The night their friends went back to the Capitol he ran a bubble bath for Katniss, let her relax and soak in a tub filled with her favorite scent. He promised her that night that he would pamper her, spoil her rotten for the rest of her life. It was something she deserved. His wife had

spent her entire life having to provide for those around her, essentially having to be the man of the house. It gave Peeta great pleasure that night making her feel like a woman. Running a tub for her, leaving a fluffy robe at her fingertips for the moment she stepped out, preparing a tray full of her favorite cold meats, cheeses, fruits and bread for a light dinner and filling their bedroom with candles. Their first day of marital bliss may not have been everything they had wanted it to be, but there was always the night.

They had wanted to go to the oak tree the next day, had spoke about it before getting out of bed in the morning, but the news of the mandatory television viewing put a damper on it.

"We could still go, Katniss." He couldn't take her to the tunnel to see the woods like he had wanted that day, but they could go to the oak tree. "It might take this television thing off of your mind."

"I just hate it when they make us watch something. I mean, why do we have to watch it? If it's us in our wedding clothes...we wore the crap, why do we have to watch it?" Katniss was standing next to the washing machine as Peeta was unloading it into the dryer.

"What are they supposed to do say everyone has to watch it except for Katniss and Peeta?" he pushed up his sleeves and pressed the button on the dryer which didn't start. "Damn it. Not again."

"What's wrong?" Katniss asked.

"Can you go flip that light switch for me please?" Peeta was well aware of what was going on. The Capitol was trying to figure out why his surveillance didn't work, it was wired throughout the house via the electrical system, but his didn't work. If Katniss turned on the light and it didn't go on then they had failed to get the surveillance up and running.

"Do you need me to keep flipping it?" Katniss asked.

"How many times have you done it?" Peeta asked from across the room.

"About a half a dozen times."

"We're good," he lifted the corner of his lip in a grin at her. "Got to go to the basement." He held his hand out to her. "Come on. I'll show you the box."

"What box?" Katniss walked alongside of him down the stairs.

"It houses all the main electrical power supplies for our house. I just need to push a couple of buttons to get the dryer up and running again." He placed a kiss on her temple. "Next month it'll probably be the fridge I'll need to restart."

"Maybe the television will go out," Katniss said flatly. "We could leave that one out and blame it on the crappy housing."

Peeta let out a little burst of laughter. "Yeah, that'll go over really well."

Was it hours...minutes? It most certainly wasn't days, but their lives had been turned upside down and into a frenzy. All signs of laughter was gone. Whatever joy he had found with Katniss as a newlywed was nonexistent the moment the president of their country ripped apart their little bit of happiness and threw them back into the arena. Peeta had almost forgotten about the tunnel that led to the woods...until Katniss went missing. He literally had to stop and dissect their conversations since he found out about the tunnel the day prior. Had he told Katniss about it? Was she gone? Did she leave him? Did she run? 'Dear God, Katniss' Peeta was racing towards Victor's Village with Gale somewhere close by, in search of Katniss who had

mysteriously disappeared after the reading of the card, 'Please don't leave me. I cannot do this without you. We're not strong enough to face those woods yet. Not where we have to go. We have to prepare ourselves for that kind of trek. We need to...my God...I can't live without you.' His hands were trembling when they entered Victor's Village and an intoxicated Katniss collapsed into Gale's arms.

"She's drunk," Gale announced.

"I'm going to kick Haymitch's ass." Peeta was more than happy to do so too. The man was their mentor. He should know better than to let Katniss get inebriated. Peeta held out his arms, "I'll take her."

Gale shook his head from side to side. "That's okay. I can carry her."

He let out a little breath in hopes to relinquish some of the stress that was consuming him. "Mind carrying her home for me?" Peeta asked Gale.

"Nah," Gale turned towards Katniss' house.

'Damn it. Tension's back,' Peeta thought to himself as he hurriedly walked towards Gale who was heading for Katniss' mother's house and stopped him before he got too far away. "Gale. She doesn't live there anymore." Peeta's eyes flew to his and Katniss' front door when he saw the questioning expression cross Gale's face.

"Oh." There was disappointment clearly written in the man's eyes.

Peeta led Gale into their home and thought to himself, 'We'll make it through this Katniss, but if I tell you about the tunnel right now...you'll run. You'll endanger yourself...the people we love, and I can't let you do that. Please forgive me for what I'm about to do to you. I swear, you will not have to go back into the arena again.'

Peeta opened up his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the room he and Katniss shared at the Tribute Center. From the moment he decided to become a Career he began hoarding the extra supplies Effie had sent through the black market distributor with their special food orders. It was the reason they were unloading all the merchant's supplies back in Twelve. Peeta had been in touch with Effie only twice during their training, they had always planned on stocking up for the possibility of an uprising in Twelve, but after the reading of the card things got a lot more serious. She got in touch with him to tell him when the camera crews would be coming and that they should concentrate on their strengths with weaponry. In other words, stay away from the extra stock. Fortunately no deliveries came when the camera crews did. The next time Peeta spoke to Effie was when he called to tell her that they were no longer training for the Games. In other words, stop sending stuff to us. Peeta and his father spent many nights hauling boxes into the woods, his father more than him since Peeta hated leaving Katniss alone at night. If only he had done what they had set out to do...leave. Just get their families and go. Never let Katniss see the inside of the arena again. 'You didn't keep your word,' he hated himself for this. 'If you had just kept your word and not let her go back into the arena you'd be safe right now. They still would've bombed Twelve, but with you and me together, Katniss...maybe...' There was no stopping the tears this time. Thoughts of his friends and family being burned alive...charred to a crisp, combined with Katniss' absence. Not knowing if she was dead or alive. Hoping she was alive. That the baby was okay. That they were both... Peeta punched the pillow to his right with his newly functioning hand and curled onto his side, drawing his knees to his chest. "Son of a bitch! Katniss! Katniss!" He screamed out her name as the tears and pain consumed him from the inside out. He cried out her name until his throat was raw and scratchy. He ignored Darius' attempts at helping him and Portia's words of comfort, but the moment he felt a delicate gloved hand curl

over his shoulder he sprung out of the fetal position he was balled into and proceeded to cry like a baby on Effie Trinket's shoulder. "I miss her, Effie. I miss her so much," he choked out. His body racked with grief, shaking...shuddering. He had done everything the president wanted him to do during his interview with Caesar that day. Effie told him what to say, and he said it, even though he hated it, he said it, but he also did what she suggested, something the president would never understand. He mouthed something very simple and basic to Katniss and all Peeta could hope was that she would be alive and well enough to understand the meaning when she watched it. "Ma...mma...my bba...baby...mmy..." he clutched at Effie, trying to hold onto her, clinging to her, drawing as much strength from her as he could.

"I know darling. I know." She stroked the back of his head.

"I miss her so mmmuch...mmmomm." Peeta had thought of Effie as his surrogate mother for awhile now, but he'd never actually called her by the name, and he hadn't realized he used the word then either. The only saving grace was that it came out sounding like he was simply mumbling.

"Oh, Peeta," Effie couldn't react to his words. She wasn't allowed.

"I want to go home. I want to go home. Please...ppplease. Tell him I'll do wwwhat...whatever he wants. We'll disappear. All...all we want is to bbbe a...a family. That's all. That's all." Peeta pulled back and screamed at the ceiling, "THAT'S ALL WE WANT! JUST LEAVE US ALONE!" Then he buried his face in Effie's shoulder.

"Shhh, dear one. Things will work out. You'll see." Peeta hoped Effie's words were a prophecy, but he didn't see her glance to the side, avoiding any form of eye contact, accidental or purposeful with him, nor could he read her mind...see the things that she knew. He could sob all he wanted that night. Mourn for those he lost whether they

were dead in a district that no longer existed, or alive in a district that was no longer *supposed* to exist. Tomorrow a whole new Games would be starting for Peeta Mellark. He would be thrown into a new arena without an alliance or weapons to defend himself.

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Katniss continually floated between two different stages of life, consciousness and dream-state. It was the only way she could define her life since leaving the arena. Consciousness consisted of time periods in which she ate, walked around with Lavinia's help, she had never known the Avox's name, but learned it after getting to Thirteen. For some reason she thought the girl's name was Darius, but that was the concussion playing tricks on her mind. Sometimes when she felt well enough, she'd sneak out of the medical bay and find a tiny corner to hide in. A dark closet or quiet stairwell, but her doctor kept getting worried about her, was constantly checking on the baby afterward, even though the baby's heart rate was just fine after Katniss' little excursions. And then there was the dream-state stages of her life. Those were causing problems for the baby...for Katniss. She couldn't seem to tell the difference between the dreams and reality. She could swear at times when she had dreams of Peeta that he was there with her...sitting with her in the room, laying in bed with her and ever since she heard the baby's heartbeat Katniss swore it wasn't the baby's heart at all. It was Peeta's. The doctor kept talking about how it was beating twice as fast as an adults, but all Katniss heard was Peeta's

heart and every single time the doctor turned up the baby's heartbeat Katniss closed her eyes and waited to hear something fast, but all she could hear was the strong and steady beat of its father.

Each day she spoke to the doctor and her husband Justus, an Avox, but she mostly spoke to Peeta. No one heard her talk, all they saw was Katniss moving her lips and staring into space. Haymitch came to visit her, so did Plutarch...Finnick, but she had nothing to say to them. She was too busy talking to Peeta at the time. Couldn't they see she was in the middle of a conversation with her husband? "I swear these men are so rude, Peeta. Effie Trinket would shit a ring around herself at the way they behave. Okay, maybe that's not the proper term to use when talking about Effie, but she would. How's she doing anyway? Haymitch was just here and he's a mess without her. He looks like crap. I think he needs a drink and they have a strict no alcohol rule here. The next time I see him, I'm planning on laughing in his face about that, but he's trying...not that I care. Rat bastard. I really need to watch my mouth. Banana nut's going to hear me talk like this pretty soon. Crap, I better get it all out of my system now then." She let out a little laugh and saw Justus smile at her. "Hey, I've got to tell you about my doctor and her husband, you are not going to believe it. My doctor is married to her Avox husband. You heard me." considering he was across the country and the only thing coming out of her mouth was air, obviously Peeta couldn't hear her, but it made her feel so comfortable...normal, talking to Peeta like he was sitting right next to her. "Apparently he was the very first rebel in the Capitol. Built some sort of underground hideout...like our tunnel, in Twelve. He and his wife, her name's Regina his name's Justus, they talk to each other with their hands. Sign language they call it. I see them teaching Lavinia, that's the redheaded Avox girl's name, she's here, Peeta and she's still taking care of me. I told her she didn't have to, but she won't stop. I'm not sure, but...I think she's sort of...sort of my friend or something. Anyway, they're trying to teach her how to talk with her

hands too. It's kind of different I guess, but who are we to judge...we talk without words." Katniss yawned and pulled the blankets up to her chin. "Know what I was thinking about this morning? Remember all of those things Cinna designed for me to wear after our Capitol wedding that never took place?" She grinned. "Yeah, I know you remember those. I started thinking about them because...I wore that first one the day you gave me my present. It was right after we made up...right after we made..." Katniss sighed, closed her eyes, cupped her hand over lower abdomen and thought, '...right after we made banana nut.'

"Katniss," Peeta's lips were pressed lightly against hers. "Wake up." He kissed her gently. "Katniss."

She opened one eye and saw one gorgeous blue eye staring back at her. She was willing to risk opening up the other. Two stunning blue eyes staring back at her. "Mmmmm," she wrapped her arm around his neck, "God how I've missed this. You're not allowed to sleep on the sofa anymore."

"I'm fine with that," he spoke against her lips, "but I don't want to sleep right now, Katniss."

"Did I give you the impression that I wanted to sleep?" She began kissing him, but he was hesitant.

"No...mmm...no...mmmno...Oh God..." Peeta pushed her gently back by the shoulders. "You are not making this easy."

It dawned on Katniss that it was dark outside. Not just dark, but pitch black. "What time is it?"

"Well, that depends," Peeta kind of twisted his face into one of child like innocence.

"Depends on what?" Katniss craned her neck around until she saw the clock on their nightstand. "For the love of...Peeta!"

"Yes, for the love of me," He smiled brightly at her. "And remember, you love me, Katniss. You love me sooooo much. So it's either really late at night or the start of a new day." He started kissing her again. Lots of little kisses all over her neck, her favorite place, and talking in between. "There's something...I want...to give...to you...but...you have...to get...out of...bed...and...get...dressed..." he stopped at her lips, "...I have a present for you Katniss. Will you let me give it to you?"

Her face was completely deadpan. "At two in the morning, the only present I want doesn't require me to leave my bed and getting dressed."

Peeta clamped his lips together, Katniss could tell he was trying not to laugh. "That's fair, but I promise, once you see this present, you'll be so happy...so..." he sat on the edge of the bed and rested his elbows against his knees. "Do you ever feel old, Katniss? Like we've aged in the past year?"

*"Yeah, like we've aged a **decade** in the past year," she answered and watched him carefully, still not too thrilled with the thought of getting up at two in the morning.*

"Well, I want to give you back your youth. Not all of it. I can't do that, but I can give you a little bit of it. Maybe bring back a small portion of your life...like...like," he turned to face her, "when we used to meet for lunch at the oak tree. Our biggest fear back then was getting caught by your mom or not seeing each other often enough." He took her hands in his. "I remember how nervous I was just to hold your hand that very first time."

"I remember when you gave me my first kiss," she tilted her head and pointed to a spot on her forehead. "It was right here."

"Don't you miss that? Miss those moments? When life was carefree? Full of nervous jitters?"

"It wasn't exactly carefree, Peeta, but...yeah...sometimes I do." She studied his expression. "What's going on? Do you want to go to the oak tree?"

"No," he shook his head. "I want to give you something better than that. Will you let me do that, Katniss?" Peeta was practically begging her.

She nodded her head. "Yes."

"Good," he jumped off of the bed. "I put your clothes on the chair for you. All you have to do is get dressed and meet me downstairs." he headed for the doorway.

"Hey," Katniss called to him, hopped out of bed then ran and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist in the process. "Let's get one thing straight. I miss a lot of things about our lunches under the oak tree, but I don't miss nervous hand holding or forehead kisses." She placed her lips against his and flicked her tongue against his bottom lip. "I happen to like being your wife and I love the perks that come along with it, so if it's just the same to you, I'd rather not go that far back in time."

Peeta pulled her body close to his and finished the kiss she started. "I have no problems with that."

"As long as we're clear." She dropped her feet to the ground. "All right, go downstairs. I have a date to get dressed for."

There were two separate dressing areas in their walk-in closet, a his and hers. The hers was much larger than the his, and even though Peeta had lived in the house alone prior to her moving in he chose to use the his side of the closet and left the hers side empty and untouched. Whenever Katniss spent the night he'd always tell her to put her things on that side of the closet, it was a room actually, and after they were married all of her things were immediately moved into that dressing area. There were drawers built into the walls that stretched sixteen feet across the room, shoe racks that worked like carousels, though she only wore three or four pairs of shoes or boots and they were usually left by the front door which drove Peeta nuts. A section of the room was designated for outerwear, Spring jackets, Fall wraps, Winter coats...fur lined... Cinna had kept her closet fully stocked with beautiful garments and she never wore them. There was a stand up hand carved mirror, two of them, two chairs, two chaise lounges, a vanity with an oval mirror and wall mirrors everywhere. Jewellery boxes that Katniss refused to fill and a wall safe for their valuables. Again something Katniss didn't use. Then there was the wardrobe with the peach and tan colored boxes stamped 'Designs by Cinna.' They varied in sizes, some had shoes to go with them, some didn't, but they were all named by the designer himself, Cinna. Katniss had seen some of the items once when he had come to their district for the wedding shoot, but she was so embarrassed back then when he lifted one of them out of the tissue paper inside of the decorative box that she turned beet red and locked herself in the bathroom for ten minutes until her color turned back to normal. Now however, she ran her hands over the different sized boxes and saw one that said "Peeta's Sunset." Katniss arched her brow in curiosity. She gingerly pulled the small cardboard container out, lifted its lid, saw that there was no tiny card inside of it that would designate matching shoes, lifted the ivory colored tissue paper up...the crinkling sound echoed throughout the empty dressing room causing Katniss to check over

her shoulders for curious onlookers, then a breath caught in her throat.

"Oh, Cinna. This is lovely," Katniss whispered as she lifted the silky garment out with two fingers and marveled at the way the colors changed. "It's his favorite color, but it's awfully...skimpy." She bit her lip until she noticed that there were two pieces and she was holding the top part. "Good. Okay." Katniss blew out a tiny breath and laid out the top of the garment across one of the chaise next to her vanity then did the same with the miniscule bottom part of the garment. "I guess we're both giving each other gifts today, Peeta." She sat at her vanity, brushed out her hair and began to braid it down the side of her head, scolding herself the entire time. 'You better be careful, Katniss. You're sitting in a lavish dressing room, at a vanity, brushing your hair with a silver handled brush, getting ready to put on silk undergarments...Peeta's right...he's spoiling you rotten.' She lifted the corner of her mouth in a grin. 'This isn't you. You are not this person. You are the kind of girl that brushes her knotty hair with her fingers,' she told herself this as she finished banding her hair with a special elastic band Peeta got her that prevents breaking the ends of your hair and doesn't rip any hair out when you remove the band. 'You bathe in ice cold water...and you're lucky if you have soap!' She remembered the warm shower she and Peeta shared the night before beneath their giant rainwater shower head and the lavender scented body wash he loved to use on her. 'You most certainly don't wear silk undergarments...and for a man!' She slid the tiny bottoms over her still smooth legs from the last treatment she got with the prep team. Cinna insisted she get depilatory rip. It was painful, but it lasted over three months and Peeta seemed to appreciate her sleek legs. Katniss looked at herself in the mirror before placing the top over her shoulders. 'Who are you?' She wondered. 'You are not Katniss Everdeen.' She looked at the girl in the mirror and came to a realization. 'You're not a girl at all are you? Maybe some parts of you

still are, but...' Katniss ran her fingertips over the waistband of the little garment Cinna designed and noticed that it came just below the freckles on her left hipbone. 'He's going to love that.' She pulled the top over her head and took a few seconds to appreciate Cinna's handiwork. "Thank you, Cinna."

Peeta was nervously playing with something between his knees, his elbows resting on them, his back arched. When he turned his head to look at Katniss as she walked down the stairs his whole face lit up. "I wasn't sure if you went back to bed or not. Thought you might stand me up or something."

"I was going to, but then I remembered this rumor I heard about you being a pretty good kisser so I thought..." she gave her shoulder a shrug, "...might as well go and see if the rumor is true." Katniss walked towards him wearing the clothes he had laid out for her.

Peeta met her halfway. "Who said I'm going to kiss you," there was a cheeky grin plastered across his face.

"Think you can keep your lips off of me?" She took a step closer to him.

He took a step closer to her. "Probably not." His nose brushed up against hers.

"Got five bucks?" her breath was beating hot against his skin.

"Yeah, why?" His lip began to brush against hers, his fingers found her waist.

"Bet you five bucks you can't keep your lips off of mine before we reach our destination." Katniss pulled back, "Which reminds me...where we going?"

He blew out a huff of air and said, "I hate taking your money Katniss and I'm not telling you." He let go of her waist. "I'm going to win this bet. I think we should make it ten bucks." He walked towards their back window.

"Told you, you were arrogant that day we were in the elevator," Katniss followed him, not thinking it strange that he used a window to leave their house. She used them all the time. "Make it fifty. In fact...let's sweeten this deal a bit," she was almost smiling when she said, "I bet I can keep my hands off of you longer than you can keep your hands off of me."

Peeta was whispering now that they were walking outside, "Oh, that's a good bet, but I'll win Katniss."

"Dream on, Peeta." Katniss had a secret weapon hiding underneath her clothes that he knew nothing about. She hadn't planned on using it that way, but this could be fun.

"Forget the money...let's make it something really good. Loser has to do what the other person says the entire day...no arguing," Peeta gave her a warning stare.

"Deal," Katniss gave him one back.

"Shall we shake on it?" Peeta asked.

"That's up to you," Katniss wasn't going to be the first one to put out her hand and be caught on a technicality.

"How about the bet hasn't officially started yet?" Peeta suggested. "Not until we get inside this place I want us to get to, okay?"

"How long will that take?"

"Longer if we keep talking." Peeta rolled his head towards Katniss telling her with his expression to shut up. "Good. Follow me and be very quiet." It only took a few minutes for them to get to the other mansion and there were no Peacekeepers on duty patrolling their village. There was usually only one at the entrance and he started around midnight. Once inside of the basement of the other mansion, Peeta said, "I'm going to teach you how to use this, but first...come here." He hugged her close to him. "I love you. No matter what you see today remember that I love you and that's why I'm showing this to you today. I'm going to kiss you now and after that," he got a playful look on his face, "our bet can start."

Katniss was confused as to what he was going to show her, but she pushed it aside the second his lips found hers in a soft kiss. His hands against her face, cupping her cheeks, his lips caressing hers with his own and love, she could feel it, feel all of his love for her. "Sure, do that to me and then expect me to act like nothing happened." She scowled at him. "Go ahead and show me what you want to show me so I can get my mind off of that damn kiss otherwise I'm going to lose that bet before it even starts."

Peeta let out a little laugh then brought her over to the workbench and showed her how to press the buttons, told her to watch the shelving unit and watched Katniss' whole face change when it moved and she saw the staircase appear. "Don't scream," he whispered to her. "Don't make any noise." He led her to the steps. "Come on. I'll show you how to shut this." He taught her how to shut the wall with the shelves. "Be careful walking down these stairs, they're not stable."

Katniss' eyes were looking from side to side...front to back. Her head whipping around trying to take in all that she could. Peeta was picking something up from the ground, some sort of torch, but the flame wasn't real it was... "Synthetic! That's Cinna's fire."

"Yeah," Peeta said quietly. "He figured out a way to make our fire into little torches. There's a few more hanging on the walls down the tunnel a ways." He was staring at her. "I know this is a bit shocking, but I'll explain it to you as we go. Think you can lift that end of the box and help me carry it?"

Katniss noticed the brown cardboard box by his feet and nodded. She picked up the end of it and began walking with him down the long dark tunnel, listening carefully as he told her where it came from, who had told him about it... "Effie! Effie knew about this? She punched Plutarch?" Katniss let out a snort of laughter as she imagined her ever so proper escort letting the Head Gamemaker have his just dues. "I'd have liked to see that."

"Me too," Peeta gave her a quick peek over his shoulder. "Look, I know I should've told you about this awhile ago, but...we're almost to the end of the tunnel, we should be quiet now. I need to make sure there's no one up there, okay?"

"Okay," Katniss whispered. She wondered where the tunnel let out. Peeta hadn't told her that. He told her where it came from, about the other districts and how it got built, even showed her the piece of machinery that built it when they walked by it. It looked like a flat ball on wheels, but Peeta picked it up and showed her the area where the tools came out, they were a form of holographic tools, light and energy, Peeta had said, that were being tested at the time and had since been scrapped as useless, but the Capitol had no idea that the holographic tools actually did work. They could be designed to have things go right through them, like light and energy should, or they could be switched into a solid and used like matter...like any other regular...thing. In this instance tools to dig a tunnel. Katniss was amazed. It took years for the small machine to create the narrow walkway, but it completed its mission and was still going strong. Many

of the other districts had malfunctions with their machines, or their tunnels collapsed on it, but more than half of the districts had tunnels. Only three of the districts had homes with no surveillance that led to the tunnels and only District Twelve had an empty home that led to the tunnel.

"Let's set this box down," Peeta whispered to her.

Katniss gulped and mouthed to him, "Is there someone up there? Is this dangerous?"

He mouthed back, "Don't know. I have to check and see, but...will you do something for me, Katniss?"

"Anything," she answered.

"Will you kiss me? I'm so afraid that once you see what's up there...you'll get so angry with me...you'll be furious and you won't want to kiss me ever again and I don't think I coul..."

Katniss stopped his words with her lips. She didn't care what was above their heads. After the Career training Peeta had put them through she never wanted to be apart from him again, and if he thought she was going to get angry with him for something, chances were she was. Yes, she'd kiss him and she'd made it a damn good kiss too. Peeta was hunched over, he was standing two steps higher than her. Katniss was on her tiptoes, her head bent back by the neck, her hands hooked over his shoulders from behind while he pulled her up to him, ravishing her mouth with his own. As their kiss slowed down, Katniss felt his hand running up her arm, reaching for her hand. She laced her fingers through his and whispered against his lips. "Let's just go out there together. Whatever's out there, we'll face it as one...the way we always do, okay?"

"I love you, Katniss. So much," He pressed his lips hard against hers.

"I love you too. Now let's do this."

"Let me take a quick peek first. It should be fine, but just let me take a look," Peeta insisted. "You stay down there." She waited at the bottom, unable to see out the door that he opened, then heard him shuffle down the stairs. "Okay, coast is clear. You've got to do me a favor," his whole face was lit up with excitement, "close your eyes."

"What?" Katniss began shaking her head. A moment ago he was checking for life threatening dangers and now he wanted her to go out there with closed eyes? "Are you insane?"

"Come on," he took her hand in his, "close them. I'll talk you up the stairs."

"I married a lunatic." Katniss closed her eyes and listened as he called out step, step... When she finally made it to land she was taken aback by the pungent scent of pine. "Peeta? Where are we?" She knew these smells..these wonderful beautiful noises.

Peeta took both of her hands in his and said very quietly to her, "What makes you happy Katniss?"

"Oh my God," her mouth went dry, her heart began to race and her eyes filled with tears. "The woods." She opened her eyes up very slowly. "The woods. Oh, Peeta, you gave me the woods!" She threw her arms around his neck and took in the beauties of nature. She didn't care why or how Effie chose to give Peeta the key that led to a tunnel which brought them to the woods, but she was thankful.

"I thought you might like this," an impish grin danced upon his lips. "I have to get the box of supplies up here, so...you just stay right here."

Don't go anywhere. I need to give you the safety zones." He darted downstairs and back up again.

"There are safety zones?" Katniss asked with a huge smile on her face.

"Yes, areas the Capitol can't see. I'll need to lay them out for you, okay?" Peeta set the box down and said, "Come here. Let me show you how to seal this. You need to do that the moment you step out of the tunnel in case anyone comes along so they don't find out about it."

Katniss nodded, "Got it." She stood up and followed him towards a large flat rock she had used many times to eat lunch on, organize the items in her game bag.

"This is the storage unit," Peeta bent down and began feeling for something. "Here," he reached for her hand, "feel this?"

There were four jagged edges protruding from underneath the stone's surface. "Yes."

"You need to press these buttons in a certain way," Peeta taught her the pattern and the rock's flat surface slid to the side revealing a well dug storage unit inside.

"Oh my God!" Katniss couldn't believe what she was seeing. "How on earth did you do all of this?"

"I didn't dig it or anything. The machine did that. It finished the tunnel then dug the storage unit. It was programmed to do it. I've just been stocking it so we could make a break for it."

"Make a break for it?" Katniss asked. "You mean...leave? Leave Twelve?"

"Yup."

"Where...where would we go?"

"That way," Peeta pointed towards the mountains. "To District Thirteen."

"District Thir..." she gasped. "Thirteen?" Katniss took a step towards the mountain terrain. "You mean...it exists?"

"It does." Peeta placed a hand on her shoulder and looked off into the distance with her. "It's out there."

"I knew it. I knew it was real, Peeta." She turned to face him. "We could go," her heart began to race. "Pack up our families and head for the hills."

Peeta's whole face lit up. "What do you think I've been packing up for?"

Katniss bent over the storage unit and looked inside. "You mean you've been planning on running away? To Thirteen?" She turned to him with a furrowed brow. "Peeta, how long have you know about this tunnel? These supplies...you couldn't have done this overnight and you sure as hell couldn't have done this alone. Who helped you? Haymitch?"

"No." He waited a second then said very carefully, "This is the part where you'll probably get mad at me, but remember, we just made up and you don't want to go back to the way we were before."

"Just tell me Peeta." She stood with her hands on her hips, her feet planted on the ground.

"Portia told me about this place the day of the wedding shoot." He held his hands up before she could start attacking him. "Now, let me explain myself before you kill me. That was the day before the reading of the card and I had every intention of telling you that night, but your foot was still a little sore from your injury and if I had told you that night, you would've wanted to walk all the way out here, plus we were a bit..." he blushed a little, "...look Katniss, we had just gotten married the day before and we had spent our first day as husband and wife apart." He kicked at a tiny pebble and dug the tip of his boot into the ground. "We missed each other and...well we were...um..."

Katniss had remembered the night of the wedding shoot all too well. "Yes, okay, I remember. I understand why you didn't tell me that night, but what about the next day?"

"We found out early that morning about the mandatory television viewing and you were very stressed out over it and...I thought if we could just make it through that day, then the next day I'd tell you and you'd be able to enjoy it, but then Snow did the reading of the card and..." Peeta sighed.

"Why didn't you tell me then?" Katniss threw her hands up in the air. "That's when you should have told me Peeta. When that white haired old goon did the reading of the card!"

"I couldn't tell you then Katniss. All you ever did back then was run away." Peeta stepped in front of her. "Think about it. That night, if you had known about this place, would you have stayed in Victors Village or would you have run through the tunnel and into the woods?"

She didn't have to think, she knew exactly where she would've gone. To the woods! "Don't try and make some sort of lame point. You knew about this place and you didn't tell me."

"For good reason. If you had come here you would've endangered everyone..." he gripped her upper arms and lowered his voice, "everyone, Katniss. All you did was run." He dropped her arms and sat on the edge of the storage unit. "You didn't care who you hurt as long as you didn't have to face your problems, and it suited you just fine at the time." He looked up at her, "But you're different now...at least I think you are."

The light Cinna had created for them wasn't quite dim enough to hide the anguish crossing Peeta's face. "Yeah, I'm different now and yes, I probably would've run here back then, but I would've come back."

*"And if you had crossed one of the Capitol's cameras in the process? How would you explain getting into the woods? Think they'd torture **you**? The woman they needed inside of the arena or maybe Prim...your mom...Gale...one of his baby brothers or Posy?" Peeta was making valid points and it was pissing Katniss off. "That's why I didn't tell you back then, and I had to tell you now because I want to run Katniss. I want to take our families and get the hell out of Twelve. Plus...I needed to give you the woods. Just one more time I wanted you to feel like that little girl that used to go to the woods with her dad again." His face flushed slightly. "I know it sounds stupid, but I wanted to give you that."*

Katniss had to sort through the mixture of emotions coursing through her veins. Sure she was angry with him for not telling her sooner, but he was right, she would've run here many times and probably put...no, definitely put all of their loved ones in danger for her own selfish reasons, but she was also upset because she would've helped him prepare for an escape instead he had to do all of this on his own, but there was no way he could have gotten all of these supplies by himself...stocked this unit... "Peeta? Who helped you with this? How did you get these supplies? Store all of this stuff?"

"Effie arranged the supplies to be shipped via a black market merchant at the Capitol...the stash was hidden amongst the deliveries we unloaded."

"Is that why we unloaded them?" Katniss asked through narrow, accusing eyes.

Peeta nodded. "Yeah, one of the reasons, but the other was to train, just in case you did want to enter the arena, which I was going to talk you out of anyway. Some of the stuff came the day of the wedding shoot in the trunks Cinna, Effie, Portia and Flavius brought with them. They all have hidden bottoms and while you were being tortured, Portia and I were unloading items that Plutarch and Effie got a hold of at the Capitol. One bag has some weapons in it, some things my dad's been sneaking in from our training like a spear or a knife...things like that."

"Oh my God!" Katniss stomped over to him. "I knew I wasn't losing my mind last week when I asked you about that damn sword. I couldn't find it anywhere."

"Yeah, my dad had hidden it between two large sheet pans and brought it to our house in the morning, then we brought it here that night." Peeta grinned a little. "You looked pretty frustrated that day."

"I swear Peeta, I thought I was imagining things. I thought, I know Peeta had a sword, but maybe I was thinking of you in the first arena and not during training," Katniss' voice turned more conversational. "So your dad, huh? Is that why he's been spending some nights in our spare room?" She took a seat on the ground next to the fake rock.

Peeta gave her a guilty look. "That and...he's going to leave my mom. I'm not sure when, but he's been talking about it since the day after the reading of the card."

"Good for him," Katniss crossed her arms and lifted her chin in the air. "He deserves a lot better than her. No offense."

"None taken." Peeta reached for her hand which she automatically took. "I'm the one that encouraged him to leave her. If only we could get my brothers to do the same. We keep trying to get them to come over for dinner or something, but they won't." He shrugged. "They think I'm going to the arena to die and they still won't leave her side to have a meal with me."

"Can't force them into something they're not ready for, Peeta." She lifted his hand to her lips and placed a kiss on his knuckles. "It'll happen in time." She blew out a breath and said, "Okay, so tell me how this escape plan is going to work."

He grinned. "So you don't hate me?"

"No I don't hate you. Tell me how we're getting the hell out of here."

Peeta settled himself next to her on the ground. "First off, these are the people we need to bring with us, your family, my dad and I'm hoping my brothers, but if they won't say yes to a dinner than we leave them behind, Gale and his family, Haymitch and... Gosh Katniss, I really wish we could bring our family from the Capitol."

"Me too," she rested her head against his shoulder. "I wish I could bring Madge and Delly. Sounds stupid, but...I'd bring them if I could."

"Yeah, I had to think long and hard about them. Madge has been such a great friend to us, but with her father being Mayor and all... but Delly... Katniss, Delly's like...well, she's like my Gale. She used to be anyway. After you and I got together and I went into the arena, I sort of pushed her away for her own protection. She never loved me the way Gale loved you so I knew she'd be okay with it if I sort of ended our

friendship. I know I hurt her when I did it, but... she knew it was for a good reason." Peeta rested his head on top of Katniss' "I love her though. Not like I love you, but I do love her."

"You want to bring her, don't you?" Katniss understood. If she had to leave Gale and his family behind she didn't think she could do it. "Do you think they could make it, Peeta? Could they survive out here?"

"That's not the problem. The problem is...if we suddenly started having dinners with the Cartwright family and the Hawthorne's...they'd know something fishy was up." Katniss could feel her hair stir from Peeta's breath as he spoke. "No, one of those families has to stay back and we have a better shot of making it to Thirteen with Gale's family so..."

"Okay, then what about just bringing Delly?" Katniss suggested.

"She'd never be able to live with herself. Could you do that? Leave your family behind?"

"Right. Dumb idea," Katniss knew it was stupid, but she had to suggest it. "Delly's a good person."

There was a long pause before Peeta asked with a great amount of pain in his voice, "Think they'll torture her after we leave? Try to get information out of her about our disappearance?"

"Doubt it. If you cut all ties with her after the Games, they'll know that." Katniss said it, but she didn't believe it.

Peeta nodded his head, then went over the plan with Katniss. "Dad's been joining us for dinner and Gale's been eating with us every now and then after training sessions. You're going to invite him to stay for dinner and I'm going to say the whole family should join us. We'll make it sort of a family dinner type of thing. Won't be too odd

considering you've spent so much time with the Hawthorne's and where we're supposed to be going in less than a month. Plus Hazelle's working for Haymitch so she's already in Victor's Village..."

"Prim goes to school with the rest of the kids," Katniss added.

"Exactly. We could be sharing dinner with them every night," Peeta said. "And then on Saturday night we'll take it to our house...let the kids stay up late...bring blankets...play boardgames, dominoes, cards, chess..."

"A sleepover!" Katniss snuggled into his arms. "Prim would love that. Oh, and Gale's off on Sundays so that would be perfect and we only have a few Sundays left here."

"Exactly. Now the first time we do that, our village will probably have a few Peacekeepers nosing around, but the second time they'll probably just send someone to check up on us and the third time..."

"The third time is when they won't think anything of it and we make our escape," Katniss liked this idea. "Of course that will be our only chance. The fourth time will be too late. We'll be on our way to the Capitol."

"Yeah, we won't be here that long," Peeta said with confidence. "We'll tell Gale only, on the second Saturday, but not Hazelle and definitely not Haymitch. He's not going to know a thing until we're throwing his ass into the tunnel and dragging him through the woods."

Katniss let out a little giggle. "Oh, I like that. Let's keep him in the dark for a change. Good idea otherwise he might try and talk us out of it or tell those stupid rebels what we've got planned."

"Won't matter," Peeta pulled her against him. "Effie knows what we've got planned. That's why she's been sending me stuff. That and because she wants to prepare for an uprising. She's even got stuff in hiding in the Capitol for us just in case. God, I love that woman."

"She does try to mother you, doesn't she?" It brought warmth to Katniss' heart.

*"Wish she **was** my mother," Peeta said under his breath. "Then I wouldn't have to worry about my brothers coming with me. They'd be there for every meal. They'd be loved...my dad would be loved."*

"Hey," Katniss turned to him, "Your dad is loved. I love him." She ran her fingers playfully up his shirt like a young girl and grinned. "He's my pops."

"He likes being your pops, you know." Peeta tucked some loose strands of hair behind her ear. "He loves it actually. He's crazy about you."

"Well, I'm crazy about him too. He's like a big ol' cuddly version of you, only not sexy or anything like that."

"Hmmm," Peeta wrapped his hands around her waist, "Am I sexy Mrs. Mellark?"

She nudged her shoulder into his chest, "Shut up. You know you are."

"Yeah," he looked up at the sky, "I know...just wanted to see you blush."

Katniss gave him a playful smack. "If you're not nice to me, I'm not going to give you my present for you."

"Wait a minute. I have a present?" He grinned. "I do love presents."

"Got any blankets in that storage thing we can use?" Katniss stood up and dusted herself off. "Or do we have to get back?"

*"Nah, we've got some time yet." Peeta stood up and found their trunks. "We've got two trunks in here. We're the only ones that can open them, they're voice activated so I'll have to set it with your voice before we go, but I've got **our** stuff in there."*

"What do you mean our stuff?" Katniss asked.

"More like...stuff for you...things I know you like and I promised myself you'd never have to be without." He kissed her temple. "Told you I was going to spoil you rotten."

"Yeah, about that...you really should stop. I don't like getting used to things like...like..."

"Like down comforters, feather pillows, luxurious bubble baths drawn by the man that loves you?" Peeta pulled out the trunk and spoke into the lock, the top popped open. He pulled out a plastic bag which had a compressed blanket of some kind in it then locked the trunk back up, pushed a few buttons then programmed Katniss' voice into it as well as the second trunk. "We'll need a tarp too. The ground is still moist from last night's storm." He took out everything they needed asked her where they were going, pointed out the areas where the Capitol's surveillance could spot them, which was pretty far off in the distance and walked to the cluster of willow trees Katniss wanted to watch the sunrise from. "This is pretty. Wish I had my sketchpad with me."

"Is it packed in one of those trunks?" Katniss joked then saw him blush a little. She tilted her head back and said, "We sat under the oak tree...I can't even remember how long ago it was, and you were trying to convince me that the Mona Lisa...a piece of art was something of

value. I didn't understand why anyone would bother saving it from before the Dark Days."

Peeta threw down the tarp then opened up the plastic bag, once the air hit it a puffy goose down comforter exploded from it and he placed it on top of the tarp making sure it didn't touch the moist earth. "You said, why save art, you can't eat it or anything."

"And you said, 'art feeds the soul.'" Katniss kicked her shoes off and stood at the edge of the blanket. "I never understood what you meant by that until you drew that sketch of you and I together and signed it, 'you feed my soul.' There are some things in life Peeta that certain people need. I need this," she extended her arms out as she stood below the hanging branches of the willow trees, the sounds of morning were just starting. "I need nature...the woods, and you need art. We each have our ways of...feeding I guess. Our own ways of surviving."

Peeta took his boots off and set them on the ground, he sat in the middle of the puffy blanket and stared up at her, surrounded by everything she loved and wished he did have his sketchpad in hand. "I don't need to sketch Katniss. I don't need anything but you."

"Shhh..." She was staring at something through the trees. "It's time." Katniss pulled her shirt over her head and revealed the silky top Cinna had designed, then quickly removed the rest of her garments before she chickened out. She heard the catch in Peeta's breath when she tossed her clothing on top of the blanket and started explaining. "Did you know that the people at the Capitol take something called a honeymoon after they get married? It's a vacation of sorts that starts the night of their wedding and lasts for a few weeks. Apparently the most popular spot over the past year has been our cave and the riverbed where I found you disguised in the mud. Those people actually reenact our..." Katniss' jaw was trembling, "...they reenact

those moments." She hated that the people from the Capitol acted out their life like it was some sort of tragic romance. "Anyway, we were supposed to have our own honeymoon while at the Capitol, orders of President Snow, though I'm not sure it was for our benefit, and he ordered Cinna to design two dozen plus items for it." Katniss held her arms out. "This is one of them. He needed to stock up the trunks he was bringing here, when he came for the wedding shoot and he brought them for me. He was going to bring them back with him, but then he found out we really did get married and he thought he'd leave them here...maybe we'd use them or something. I told him he was nuts, but" she shrugged a shoulder. "Each one has a name and this one is called 'Peeta's Sunset.' This morning when you woke me up and told me to get dressed..." she had yet to look him in the eyes, "...I don't know why I put it on, I thought maybe...after we got home you might like to see me in it, and we had such little time left together, but now...we're in the woods...and the sun is going to rise any minute and I wanted you to see it...and...and..." She could feel the heat radiating off of her skin. "I'm an idiot. I have no idea why I did this."

"Katniss," Peeta said very quietly. "Shut up. Just...wow. Do me a favor, move your braid behind your back and lift your chin." He was looking at her with that combination far off look and total bewilderment. Katniss did what he asked. "That strap is crooked, can you fix it for me please?" Katniss looked at her shoulders and adjusted the twisted strap. "Turn around...very slowly." She turned in a circle and heard him catch his breath. "Holy cow. Okay...stop. Step to your left. Turn towards me a little...stop. Now, look at me." Katniss turned her eyes to his and her heart sighed. "The sun is coming up...Dear God this is exquisite. I've never seen the sun rise and set at the same time before, but that's what I'm looking at right now...it's amazing...the colors are so..."

"Describe it for me," Katniss knew from her many times posing for him, regardless of whether or not he held a piece of paper and pencil in his hand, Peeta was sketching her, memorizing every color, curve...everything about her pose and the imagery around her.

"You can barely see the sky through the trunks of the trees, their branches are weighed down by the heavy white wisps burgeoning with blossoms. Between them a combination of colors...streaks of deep saffron, persimmon...gold...blended with soft, yet bold shades of Persian rose and the most beautiful cerise pink. It's a striking contrast to the...I'm not sure what to call what you're wearing, that Cinna designed."

"Lingerie," Katniss said in a trance like tone.

"Lingerie?"

"It's a fancy word for women's underwear." Katniss blushed a little.

"I like that word. It suits what you're wearing. A striking shade of orange that's darker at the top then slowly fades to a soft glowing yellow at the hem. Like the sun is setting on your skin." He studied her. "Peeta's sunset. I can see it, the little bits of dogwood rose used as stitching...the hints of brushed indigo woven throughout the lace in the back...blending carefully into delicate champagne then muted gold and buttery yellow." Peeta held Katniss' gaze. "Cinna is a true artist. I don't think I ever appreciated his work before, but these...you said he did more than two dozen pieces?"

"Yes," Katniss swallowed.

Peeta just nodded. "I'm afraid I made you miss the sunrise."

"That's okay." Katniss still held her pose.

He stared at her like he was trying to find the right words to say then began to recite something from memory, "Every time you touch me. Don't you feel it too? The gentle hand guiding us, you to me, me to you. After all the might have beens, the close and distant calls. After all the try agains, don't be afraid to fall. We're on the side of angels after all."

Katniss felt her mouth go dry at his words. "That's beautiful. Did you...did you just think of that?"

He let out a little chuckle. "No. I'm an artist not a writer." The smile left his face. "After the Games, when we were apart, Effie bombarded me with all sorts of literature...music...you name it. Said she was broadening my horizons. One of the things she sent to me was a music chip that held songs from before the Dark Days. Those are the words of one of the songs I used to listen to. Kind of became obsessed with actually." His glance faltered then met hers again. "I used to imagine you singing that to me...those words. Telling me that something more was pushing us...guiding us towards one another and no matter how much people tried to keep us apart...no matter what came between us, we'd make it. That we didn't have to be afraid to fall in love. We had something...special on our side."

Katniss thought about what he had said and asked, "You don't actually believe in angels, do you?"

Peeta gave her a loving smile and answered, "Kind of hard not to when I'm staring right at one."

No one actually believed in things like that. They were fantasies, like fairies, dragons and the right to eat without being punished. She had no clue what to say to his sweet sentiment so she did what she always did. She avoided the topic of conversation. "Can I move now?"

He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin. "Yeah." He held his arms up to her. "Come here."

She was more than happy to oblige. "Can I get dressed now too?"

*"Not quite yet. I'd like to hold you first then you can get dressed."
Peeta kissed her forehead. "Thank you for my present. "I loved it."*

"You're welcome." Katniss curled closer to him. "If it makes you feel any better, I felt just like I did when you held my hand under the oak tree, or when you hugged me for the first time. I was petrified."

"Why?" Peeta pulled back and looked at her. "You're telling me you're still scared of me?"

"No, but...let's face it, this thing really isn't me." Katniss reached for her clothes.

*"Hey, Katniss?" Peeta pulled her back and kissed her. "What would you say if I told you that thing might not be **you**, but it's definitely me?" He wagged his brows at her. "I'd be very interested in seeing the rest of Cinna's designs Mrs. Mellark."*

"Oh, Lord. I've created a monster." She stood up to get dressed but his arms went around her waist. "It's not happening Peeta."

"I believe you lost a bet, Katniss and you have to do what I say."

"I did not lose that bet!" She turned to face him. "You lost that bet!"

"No I didn't. You were the one that kissed me. I asked you to and you caved in." He gave her a smug look. To which she responded with a couple of fish like open, close mouth moves. "Told you I'd win."

"That's not fair...I...you...but I..."

"All's fair in love and...well when it comes to you and me definitely war." Peeta ducked when Katniss smacked the top of his head.

"Ouch," he chuckled. "I didn't try to win on purpose or anything. I really did want to kiss you in there. If you hadn't kissed me, I would've kissed you."

"Then you should relinquish the bet."

"Hey, I'm not stupid. Have you seen yourself in this thing?" Peeta gripped her around the waist as she pounded against his shoulders.

"God, Katniss I love it when you get feisty."

"Stop it. I'm mad at you."

"Yeah, I know you are." He trailed kisses down her neck. "You're furious."

"I am," God she loved it when he flicked his tongue against her earlobe. "I didn't wear this so you could have your way with me. I wore it so...so...oh, right there," she dropped her head back.

"Tell me why you wore it," he nibbled that little spot she loved so much.

"Shut up and kiss me Peeta."

"I thought I was the one that got to tell you what to do today."

Katniss ran her foot up his calf, "You really want to make that point right now?"

Peeta pulled away from her and met her gaze, "Sorry I fought with you. I was just being stupid. I didn't mean it."

"I know," she ran her fingers through his hair. "Me either."

"I should've told you about this place sooner."

"You did the right thing."

"You can win the bet if you want," he wrapped her braid around his hand.

"That's okay. You won fair...okay you were sneaky about it, but you won," she unbuttoned his shirt.

"We don't have much more time out here." He pulled his shirt off and threw it down next to her clothes.

"So we'll hurry."

"Sorry you missed the sunrise, but I did describe it for you," he breathed against her lips.

"I didn't really understand anything except for the words pink, orange and gold, but it sounded breathtaking." She felt herself being lifted into his arms.

"You were the most breathtaking part of the morning...you are the greatest work of art I have ever seen."

"Peeta... I love you," Katniss wrapped her arms around him and felt herself being lowered to the soft goose down comforter, heard the sounds of the woods surrounding her, felt the love of her husband fill her soul and for the first time in her life experienced a form of freedom she had never known existed.

"Hey," Peeta was packing up the comforter. "I think you forgot something."

Katniss finished tying her boots and looked up at what Peeta was holding. "Nope. Wrap that up in the blanket or something."

"Don't you want to bring this back home?" He held Cinna's creation in his hand. "Personally I'd like it if you wore Peeta's sunset again."

"Which is why you're putting it in that blanket and packing it up with the rest of that stuff. Just make sure you mark the box with my name or something so no one goes opening it up, okay?"

"Now look who's spoiling who," Peeta grinned.

"Yeah, that still doesn't mean I'm wearing the rest of those things he designed. Some of those are a little..." Katniss shook her head, "...let's just say, I don't think Cinna was sober when he designed them."

"What makes you think that?" Peeta packed up the quilt. "This isn't going to fit in that trunk again. I don't have that thing to take all the air out of the packaging. I'm going to have to shove it in a box."

"Like I said, make sure you put my name on it." Katniss pressed the buttons and opened the hatch to the tunnel. "Hey, got it on my first try. Your wife is brilliant."

"Why do you think I married you? Lord knows it wasn't for you cooking skills." Peeta laughed.

"Do not start with me and my cooking. Shut that thing up already so we can go. If anyone came to our house, they're going to wonder where we are." Katniss rushed him along.

"Yeah, I know. I know. Do you always have to get so superior and bossy?" He closed the storage unit up and the woods looked like the woods again.

"Yes, I do." Katniss walked down the stairs. "Be careful on those with that leg of yours, though I don't know why I'm telling you that. Your leg works better than mine does. Hey," she called behind her, "are you listening to me?"

"I married Effie Trinket," Peeta mumbled. "She's nagging at me like Effie nags at Haymitch."

"I can hear you."

"It was meant for you to hear," Peeta called to her as she jogged ahead of him giggling.

"Come on," she held Cinna's light ahead of her so she could see her way back in the dark tunnel. "Hurry up Peeta." Katniss pressed the buttons to exit the tunnel and raced back home, leaving the synthetic torch behind for Peeta to take care of. She opened the window in the back of their house and ran up the stairs to their bedroom, "I knew I'd beat you here. Hey, where are you?" She threw herself down on the mattress and waited for him to show up. She was exhausted. She kicked her boots off, stripped off her clothes and pulled on one of his pajama shirts. Their big plan for the day was to stay in bed unless someone bothered them, otherwise...they weren't moving. "What the hell is taking you so long?" She walked down the stairs and towards the window which was closed. Peeta's boots were by the front door, there was bread in the oven, but the house didn't smell like cinnamon or yeast it smelled like the bread was burning. Katniss checked the oven and called out, "I don't bake! And you're burning whatev...oh," there was nothing in the oven. In fact, it was ice cold, but the stench of fire was in the air. "Where are you?" She looked around the room and wondered if maybe he had burnt something and was throwing a load of laundry in the wash, but then she saw him.

"There you are," Katniss wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close to her. She didn't know why, but she felt like he wasn't supposed to be there with her. "I...I didn't know where you were. I've been worried and..." she started to cry and she had no explanation for it. "Don't leave me again." She kissed his cheek. "I love you. I love you so much," she whispered in his ear.

"Do you mean that, Katniss?" he asked.

"Of course I do." She closed her eyes tightly just trying to hold onto him. She was floating between a world of sleep and consciousness, but things were still so hazy. Katniss knew she wasn't in District Twelve anymore, she was in Thirteen...with Peeta. They had made it to Thirteen. At least she thought that's what had happened. "Where are we?" She whispered quietly in his ear, hoping she wasn't at the Capitol.

"Thirteen," he said. "Tell me you love me again."

"I love you," she was thrilled when she heard the word Thirteen and trailed kisses across his stubbly cheek until she met his lips. 'Strange,' she thought, 'when did you get stubble. Your skin is always so smooth and your lips don't feel right...your kiss is a bit...' "Slow down," she said against his mouth. "You don't need to devour me like I'm your last meal."

"Sorry. Guess I'm just a little excited at the thought of you finally saying you love me. I've been waiting a long time to hear that, Catnip." He kissed her again.

"Do **not** call me that," she threaded her fingers through his hair and it was wrong...all wrong.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you," Gale said brusquely.

Katniss sat up and looked around the room. "Where am I? Dr. Valero? Dr. Valero!" From around a corner of the room the doctor and her husband entered.

"Katniss, are you alright?"

"Where am I?" Katniss asked.

"The same place you've been since you left the arena," Dr. Valero walked slowly up to the hospital bed and removed an electronic device from her jacket pocket. "Why don't we check your vitals? See how you and the baby are doing?"

"Where's Peeta?" Katniss began raising her voice. "He was just here."

"No, Katniss. Peeta isn't here. As far as we know, the Capitol hovercraft picked him up." The doctor looked at Gale and said, "You'll need to leave now."

"You...Gale? You're real?" Katniss was sure he was a figment of her imagination.

"Yeah, Catnip. I'm real," he answered. "I'm here." He tried to hold her hand, but she pulled it away.

"Where's Peeta, Gale?" Katniss pleaded with him. "Did you see him? Is he in Twelve?"

"Katniss," Gale started shaking his head, "Didn't anybody tell you?"

"Mr. Hawthorne," the doctor's voice raised, "you need to leave this very minute."

"I'm not going anywhere until someone tells her," Gale insisted.

"Tells me what?" Katniss began looking back and forth between Gale and the doctor.

"Katniss, you need to relax," Dr. Valero had the little device over her abdomen and the baby was being displayed. "Please, Mr. Hawthorne, this isn't doing her child any..."

"She'd want to know!" Gale yelled out. "Someone has to tell her. Katniss," he turned to her as Justus began removing him from the room.

"What? What does he have to tell me? What are you keeping from me?!" She yelled at the doctor. "Is it Peeta? Wait! Gale! Why are you here? Why aren't you in Twelve?!"

"There is no Twelve," he called out to her as Justus forced him from the room. "It's gone Catnip! Twelve is gone!"

"No," Katniss could feel her heart start to race, heard the doctor scream for her husband to hurry up and come back and then she heard a high pitched beeping noise coming from the machine that monitored the baby's vitals. There was no more District Twelve.

"JUSTUS!" Katniss heard Dr. Valero call for her husband, saw the doctor race around the room for different medications and noticed the Avox' expression when he saw the screen that featured her baby's image and the ear splitting beep that was coming from the machine resting against her stomach. The last thing she *felt* was a needle being pressed into her vein. The last thing she *saw* was her mother and Prim watching her through a glass window and Peeta's father yelling at Gale. The last thing she *heard* was, "We're losing the baby!"

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 2: True Colors, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter One: True Colors

Well, I'm working this the way I always do, writing one chapter for every one in the book. Thank you so much to all of you for your warm words of support during my illness. I got a ton of get better soon PM's and they meant the world to me. Thanks for your great reviews. Some of them make me laugh my butt off! Some of them take my breath away, but they all mean the world to me. Thanks! Thanks S and A for your hard work and being so patient with me.

If you'd like to know more about future chapters before they're published, follow me on tumblr. [www dotted jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://www.dottedjamiesommers23.tumblr.com).

Shall we all take a little trip into the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

The sound of Effie's high heels was clicking as she walked down the hall in front of the Peacekeepers that were dragging Peeta behind her. "Come. Come now." She pushed the down button on the elevator. "Throw him in here and I shall have the guards pick him up when we reach the bottom levels," she shooed the Peacekeepers away stepping over Peeta, his cuts and bruises fresh and raw, like he was a bump in the carpeting, paying him no mind until the doors to the elevator closed. "Oh my darling boy, are you alright?" She bent at the knees to check on him, careful not to touch any bloody spots so the guards wouldn't suspect that she was helping him.

"Effie, what's going on? Why are you acting this way? I don't get it?" Peeta looked up at her through swollen eyes. "One minute you're on my side the next you're acting like you're enjoying my beatings."

"Remember, Peeta, they are trying to turn you against the people you love. Do not forget you can trust me."

"That's right," he gave her a little smile. They don't know about us...not the real us anyway. I'm burning up, Effie."

"I know dear one," She opened up her purse, pulled out a tiny syringe and shot him in the hairline with something. "That will help lower your body temperature down. Now quickly, who do you love?"

"Katniss."

"Who can you trust?"

"Katniss, but Effie the things they've..."

"No, Peeta. It's all lies. Remember?"

"That's right. They lie. The Capitol lies, but you don't. Not to me anyway."

"No darling I don't. Now Johanna will help you. She'll talk to you and tell you about Katniss, make sure you ask her to tell you about her the second you get in the cell. What will you ask Johanna when you get into the cell?"

"About Katniss."

"Who do you love?"

"Katniss."

"Who do you trust?"

"Katniss. I love Katniss. I love Katniss. Even though I'm mad at her, I love her."

"Try to remember, you have nothing to be mad at her about. They've lied to you." Effie tried not to hurt for the boy, but she couldn't help it. He was getting so thin. "Have they fed you anything at all?" She watched as he shook his head from side to side. "I'll see what I can do about that, but I make no promises." Effie glanced upwards and saw that they were almost to the lowest level. She made certain to accompany Peeta to his cell each day so the guards didn't take it upon themselves to inflict their own form of punishment on him. "I shall send Darius in with something if I can." She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Stay alive my dear boy. Stay alive." She stood up

and quickly straightened herself out. "You there," she pointed to a smaller Peacekeeper and a medium sized one, "come transport this prisoner to his cell."

"Yes, ma'am." They spoke in unison. Clear and concise. Though the two men weren't as large as most Peacekeepers, dragging Peeta to his cell was no problem for them. They tossed him into the confined space next to Johanna Mason with ease.

"Peeta, perhaps tomorrow you and I will be able to communicate a little more freely," Effie said ever so sweetly. "I do hate the way our talks have been ending lately." She looked over at Johanna. "Should I even bother with you?"

Effie could see the tremble in the girl's jawline, whether it was anger or fear she didn't know. "I've got me a regular torturer. Thanks for the offer though." Johanna stepped back into the darkness. "Come on Peeta." Her filthy fingertips appeared out of the blackness and pulled Peeta into the shadows with her.

"Till tomorrow." Effie waved her gloved fingertips over her shoulder as she left the pair with a heavy burden in her heart. "Toodle ooh."

The elevator ride to the floor where she and Annie were staying seemed to take forever. The second she opened the door to her and Annie's shared quarters she announced her arrival. "Annie, I'm home dear one." She couldn't save Peeta, there was nothing she could do to protect him from the wrath of President Snow, but she was able to save Annie Cresta though it had taken some very quick and dangerous thinking.

Effie had scooped up the bag that held her clothing in it as she raced away from Haymitch. She knew she was blubbering like a schoolgirl at his confession to her. He may not have come right out and said it, but

now Effie knew how much she meant to the man. The simple fact that he had compared her to Maysilee left her heart singing and shattered all within a matter of seconds. The hovercycle Plutarch had arranged to be hidden beneath the bushes at the edge of the Capitol was waiting for her, fully charged and ready to be ridden to one of the private restrooms close to her home. Effie sat back in a reclining position and placed her feet on the pedals of the hovercycle. She wasn't sure why they called it a cycle other than the fact that they put wheels on it to give it a more nostalgic appearance. To Effie it was like a reclining chair with pedals and you could drive. It was really quite convenient. Many of her friends enjoyed using them when shopping, but Effie was always one for walking. She enjoyed the feeling of the earth under her feet, not flying past her. Once she made it to the public restroom, she followed Plutarch's instructions and left the hovercycle with a group of others that were parked next to a very busy tavern with the key in the ignition. She entered a private restroom by using one of the codes Plutarch had provided, changed out of her costume and turned back into Effie Trinket then went home. She slunk into her house, slid her shoes off, walked through the entire place before pulling out the trunk with the false bottom and when she felt it was safe, she hid her costumes with the rest in the bottom of the trunk then replaced the false bottom and layered old shoes, and accessories on top to give it weight. She stared at herself in the mirror, making sure her appearance was just right, it had to be perfect, and sat on the edge of the tub waiting for the inevitable. The moment she heard the stomping of the boots she thought, 'Perhaps you Peacekeepers should take a lesson in sneaking up on your targets,' and turned her tub on as though she were just about to step into it.

"May I help you?" Effie stood with her door open after letting them bang on it for a few seconds.

"Miss. Trinket," there was an elite squad member speaking, "President Snow requests your presence immediately."

"Well," Effie looked as though she were flattered. "If you wouldn't mind coming inside. I was just about to freshen up. It's been an awfully long day." She headed for the bathroom, but was headed off by a couple of Peacekeepers. "My. My." Her fingers rested against her decollete. "The tub will overflow if it is not shut off. Would you mind?"

"My men will take care of that for you," the elite squad member spoke again.

"There you go," Effie brightened up. "All ready then." She stopped by the door to slip on her shoes. "Oh, heaven help me I still smell like that rot gut." She turned to face the elite member and said quietly, "I don't suppose you could send in a female guard to watch me change so I won't have to face the president smelling like a...distillery?"

"Sorry Miss. Trinket."

"Such is life," she stepped out of her home and knew that she wouldn't see it again for quite sometime.

The president was waiting for her in a room similar to the one Viggo had questioned Portia in. There was a large table, several doors and one wall that held a large work of art on it. Two of his guards stood behind him, an Avox to his left next to a marble bar with exquisite crystal decanters and glasses on it and the rest of the room was devoid of people, though Effie was certain the president didn't think of his guard or the Avox as people. He got to his feet and gestured to a chair. "Have a seat Miss. Trinket."

"Why thank you, sir." Effie flashed a look towards the closest servant, a male Peacekeeper, telling him that he should be pulling her chair out

for her, then took a seat. She flashed the president her very bright smile, crossed her legs at the ankles and spoke just above a whisper, "If you would allow me the opportunity to apologize for my appearance. I was in the midst of freshening up when you requested my presence and one must never keep their president waiting."

"You look divine, Miss. Trinket," the president assured her as he gave her a once over. It was vital that he noticed her attire this evening. Effie was wearing, down to the eyelashes, the exact same outfit she had worn while making the video with Viggo. She even had the bruises on her throat, compliments of Darius who had truly resisted giving them to her, but knew that he had to. He was the only one that wouldn't speak a word about her getting them to begin with which is why she went to him that morning and whispered into his ear...begged for his help. "You may leave," The president dismissed his staff. Once they were gone he gave Effie an approving nod. "It appears that my plan to capture evidence against Viggo Bettes as a rebellious traitor has in fact worked. Having you meet with the Head Gamemaker, learning how to use a portable camera and luring him into that illicit stockpile of medical supplies..." President Snow pursed his lips tightly, inhaled through his nostrils then sniffed at the rose he had pinned to his lapel. Effie wondered if it was laced with drugs, as the man seemed to relax quite a bit after smelling the flower. "You did quite well, Miss. Trinket. Quite well indeed."

"Thank you, sir." Effie lifted her fingertips and trailed them across her throat where the makeup covered her bruises.

"I trust the injuries Mr. Bettes caused you weren't too severe?"

Effie straightened her shoulders, "Taken in the line of duty, sir."

"Allow me to pay you back for your sacrifice." He ran a finger over a remote control and the large display of art turned into a clear wall with

Viggo Bettes on the other side of it. His hands were cuffed behind his back, his feet spread about shoulder distance apart, one eye was bloodied and bruised, his nose had blood dripping from it and from his waist there was a belt of some sort with two poles coming out of the sides a Peacekeeper on each end of it, occasionally pushing or pulling at him. "As you can see, we're currently in the process of questioning Mr. Bettes and his motivations for creating such a room as the escort's medical bay."

"Good for you, sir. I hope you get your answers." It took everything Effie had not to cringe at the sight of Viggo. She had caused this. This was the direct result of her actions, yet she had to be proud, her president was expecting it of her.

"Unfortunately we're not getting the answers we'd like. I was hoping perhaps, you could give us a helping hand with that." The president's eyes looked up at the television screen hanging behind Effie's head. It was muted, but he could see the picture. "What is going on in there?"

"It looks as though the Peacekeepers are attempting to keep Viggo on his feet, but he's..."

"No. No." The president gestured with two fingers towards the television screen then pushed another button on the remote to get sound. "In the arena."

She couldn't look at her watch no matter how tempting it was. "Are the tributes stuck in a portion of the arena they've never been in before?"

"I'm unsure?" The president looked to her. "Do you have the time?"

"Yes," Effie looked at her timepiece, "it's almost midnight."

President Snow sat down at the table and pushed another button on the remote. Viggo disappeared and now the work of art was a large television screen. The only tributes on display were Katniss and Enobaria who appeared to be running away from the beach into the jungle. "Where are the rest of her allies?" The president was thumbing at his puffy bottom lip. "What is she aiming at?"

"I don't know, sir." 'Shoot it, Katniss! Shoot it!' Effie's heart was practically screaming for joy. "Oh, I know...they were going to try and kill the Careers. Of course, she'll be lucky if she doesn't kill herself in the process."

"Yes," Snow said cautiously. "That's right. The Caree..." His face turned beet red as his hands slammed down on the table, knocking the remote to the floor when Katniss shot her arrow into the air and the force field keeping the tributes trapped inside of the arena, exploded into a burst of white light.

"Oh my word! Oh my word!" Effie was as shocked as shocked could be. If she could have jumped for joy without getting herself killed, she would have. "Did she actually kill herself?"

"What the hell is going on in there?!" President Snow turned his head from side to side in search of something. "My remote!"

"Here sir," Effie bent down and retrieved it, fumbling with it as she handed it to him.

He pushed several buttons then screamed, "Plutarch Heavensbee!"

A voice filtered into the room. "The Head Gamemaker has been missing since one of the systems went down, sir."

"What do you mean missing?" Effie stepped back and watched as the veins bulged in the President's temples.

"Just that sir. He received a call from one of the Capitol officials, Mr. Bettes, regarding a technical issue and we haven't heard from him since."

The President ran his finger over the remote now the work of art was half Viggo and half the arena. "Cut all of the feeds to the Games with the exception of mine."

"I'm sorry sir, if we cut the feeds we have to cut all of them or none of them."

"Then cut them all you imbecile! NOW!"

"Yes, sir." Effie could hear whoever Plutarch left in charge screaming out, "Cut the feeds. Cut the feeds. Shut it down!" Then the screen next to Viggo's pathetic form went black. "Sir, it's down. Should we try and get it back up for you?"

"That would be much appreciated." President Snow pushed another button and rid himself of the voice then looked up at Effie. "It seems your tribute blew up the force field surrounding the arena."

"My word," Effie put her hand on the back of a chair to steady herself. "What a buffoon! Does she not realize the Games cannot continue without the force field in place? That," Effie pointed towards the television screen, "is exactly why I quit earlier this evening. Because I'm surrounded by a group of morons. Well, I suppose now I have no choice but to go back to that disgusting district and be their escort until the Gamemakers get the arena up and running again...oh...wait...didn't they say, the Head Gamemaker is missing? That..." Effie turned her head towards Viggo.

"Yes, they said the Head Gamemaker was missing which leads me to wonder what Mr. Bettes has done with the man." The president pushed another button on the remote. "Which of our tactical bases are prepared for an attack against District Twelve?"

"Mr. President, we have three bases that are currently running drills, the one closest to Twelve is right on the coast of Eleven."

"How long until they can strike against District Twelve?" The president asked.

"They are in the process of a live ammo training mission sir, all they have to do is change course. I'd say...ten minutes." Effie watched the President's eyes light up with excitement when he heard the news. "Shall I call it in sir?"

"Yes."

"We'll strike the coalmine first Mr. President. That will cause the most damage to the area, burn the longest."

"NO!" Snow ordered. "You shall hit their Town Square, Mellark's Bakery would be preferable," he practically spit out. "I'm not looking for burning the longest, My intentions are to send a message. These, what did you call them Miss. Trinket?" He looked to Effie.

She had to think for a second. "Mongrels, sir."

"Yes, these mongrels, shall pay for what they are doing to my country. Wiping out a district served to end one rebellion, perhaps it's time we do so once again," Snow spoke about ending the lives of thousands as though it meant no more than what he was ordering for dinner.

"Yes, sir. Shall I keep you up to date on the attack as it progresses sir or your Head of Defense Official?"

"My Head of Defense would be satisfactory, though I'd like to be updated when the airstrike is over."

"Yes, sir." The voice was gone.

"Is our nation in danger of an uprising, sir?" It was taking all of Effie's acting skills tonight, everything she had, to pull this off.

"One moment, if you please?" The president held up a finger to her. Another button pushed. Another voice filled the room. "Have we sent in a hovercraft for the tributes yet?"

"We have a slight problem with that, sir."

"What's the problem?" Snow pressed his fingers to his temples and rubbed. Effie could tell she was already filling her role as his personal assistant, now she had to make herself invaluable. She walked to the bar and poured him a cup of tea, placed some honey as well as sugar cubes on a plate and brought the tray to him as she listened carefully to the president's voice gradually getting louder and louder when he found out that they were having a problem tracking the tributes locations. "Can you find Miss. Everdeen or Mr. Mellark?"

"We've located both sir, but Mr. Mellark's tracker states that he is underneath the Cornucopia and we no longer have any signal on his vitals. As for his wife..."

"THEY ARE NOT MARRIED! Did you go to a Capitol wedding? I did not officiate their wedding so do not call them husband and wife!" The President took a deep breath through his nose then asked again, "Miss. Everdeen? What about her?"

"Sir, we just lost all of her vitals, but our hovercraft has detected another craft in the arena."

"Did you send two into the arena?"

"Uh...no sir."

The president pressed a button, "Mr. Pembroke when we decided to transfer the hovercraft codes to you, am I to assume you got this done in a timely manner?"

"Mr. President, I am currently in the process of renovations to a secure room for the computer syste.."

The president pressed the button on the remote and cut him off. "Well, Miss. Trinket, it seems that Mr. Bettes has gone to a great deal of trouble to break those tributes out of the arena."

"My, goodness." Effie turned to look at Viggo through the glass.

The president spoke to the control room again, "Match destinations with the other hovercraft in the arena and pick up the tributes."

"Sir we've tried to access their location, but we've been locked out."

"Locked out?! How can you be locked out of our own systems?!" Snow slammed his palms on the table. "Who is second in charge while Heavensbee is gone?"

"Cressida, but she's missing too sir. Mr. Heavensbee's entire top tier of personnel, director, assistants, film crew, cameramen...well...sir, many of them were pulled when the surveillance in the Capitol went down."

"The sur..." That was it. Effie could see it in the president's face. There was just too much happening at once for him to process without exploding. The remote control was thrown across the room with such force that Effie was surprised it didn't shatter into a million pieces instead of five or six.

She waited approximately ten seconds before squaring her shoulders and saying, "I am ready for duty sir. What is our first course of action?"

He stood at the end of the long, polished table, his hands gripping the edge so tightly Effie was certain he would break chunks of the hand carved cherry wood off into his palms then lifted his focus to her and calmly said, "Your first duty will be to get me a new remote control and clean that mess up," he gestured with his hand at the few broken pieces of the device on the floor.

"Yes, sir." Effie stepped outside and found the Avox along with several guards standing there. "The President needs a new remote control immediately. Wait!" She thought for a second. "He needs two remotes." Effie pointed to one of the guards. "Do you know where to get them?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Then I suggest you run like your life depends on it, because it just might." She faced one of the other guards. "When he gets back you are to knock once. One knock on the door and I will answer it and retrieve the remotes. He had better be quick. The president doesn't like to be kept waiting." Effie walked back into the room and saw him staring through the looking glass at Viggo. "Your remote is on the way sir. Is there anything else I can do while we are waiting?"

"Yes, you can follow me p..."

*The sound of a beep filtered through the room followed by a voice.
"Mr. President, sir? Pardon the interruption but I thought you'd like to know that we are able to see the hovercraft above the arena sir and are attempting to intercept it as we speak."*

"Excellent. Is there a way to display it on screen?"

*"I'm sorry, sir. With the surveillance down, the only way to display what is going on in the arena is to turn on all of the camera feeds and we're not sure we're able to reboot them since the electrical explosion. I **can** patch the pilot's communications through to you sir."*

"Excellent. If you wouldn't mind."

One loud knock came to the door. "Excuse me, sir." Effie opened it and took the remotes without so much as a how do you do, then closed the door in the guard's face. "Here you are sir and I have one extra so we'll never be in wait again." Effie squinted, "Perhaps you'd like me to use this to contact your officials on your behalf and locate them...summon them to your desired location?"

Snow narrowed his eyes in thought, "Why don't we put that on hold for the time being Miss. Trinket? I'd like to listen to the pilot of the hovercraft right now."

"Sir, if you'd rather I not be present for such..."

*"Nonsense, Miss. Trinket." President Snow motioned for her to take a seat. "This is the job you accepted, is it not? And I **was** under the impression that you had resigned from your former position as an escort earlier this evening."*

"Sir, I have the pilot's communications ready to be patched through to your location now," the voice spoke.

"Good. Good."

Effie sat across from President Snow and listened intently to the pilot of the hovercraft as he spoke. "Mr. President we have one tribute on board sir, her tracking device was still in her arm. The physicians have sedated her and are treating her for minor injuries, malnutrition and dehydration. We are currently on our way towards the other hovercraft, sir, though we are unsure who is operating the machine."

"Pilot, have you tried to communicate with the other hovercraft?" The president asked.

"Multiple times sir, but we've received no answer."

"Do you have weapons on board?" Snow asked.

"We do, but they have been...tampered with and are no longer functioning." The pilot answered.

Effie watched as the president grimaced. "Can you see where the other hovercraft is heading?"

"Yes, sir. There was a life sign a few minutes ago. A tribute from District Twelve, but her tracking device went dead as did her vital signs and we lost her."

"Can't you simply head to her last known coordinates?" The President asked through gritted teeth.

"We could sir, if our hovercraft hadn't gotten a residual shock from the force field exploding. Now our radar's memory has been wiped clean."

"How about your eyes? You do have those, don't you?" The president asked. "Tell me pilot, how are you able to see the hovercraft?"

"Out the windows sir."

Snow's nostrils flared and Effie could tell by the expression on his face that he was getting fed up with the pilot's ridiculous answers. "Then wouldn't it make sense to look out the windows and head in the same direction you were going in before your radar was damaged?"

"Well, yes sir, but..."

*"But **what**, pilot?" Snow snapped. "Do not let those tributes get on that other hovercraft or you will regret it."*

"Yes, sir. We're heading towards them right now Mr. President and...sir...it looks as though they've just lifted some tributes into the craft with a claw. They've got a ladder moving down now. We're on a course for interception, sir."

"Crash into the damn thing if you have to, but do not let them leave that arena!"

"Sir! Two tributes have just fallen from the ladder and the hovercraft is leaving. Do you want us to follow or pick up the tributes?"

"Follow! Follow!" Snow had saliva gathering in the corner of his mouth.

"Sir, our engines are going offline. The electrical current must have..."

"Pick up the tributes and bring them back. I want to know who they are immediately." Snow rubbed at his temple, pinched the bridge of his nose then turned his head to take a whiff of his rose. Again Effie saw him relax, then dab at the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief.

"It's the female tribute from District Seven, Johanna Mason and the male from District Twelve, Peeta Mellark."

Effie had to literally clench her teeth together to stop herself from screaming. Her boy, her darling, baby boy didn't make it to freedom. Now what was she going to do to save his life? 'Haymitch you're going to have to come back for him,' she thought to herself. 'You'll have to come back for me and for him and you better make it snappy.'

"Well, Miss. Trinket at least this wasn't a complete loss. We managed to get one of those savages before the rebels could."

"Rebels?" Effie's face spoke of complete and utter shock. "You don't mean actual rebels, sir...do you? As in, before the Dark Days?"

"That is exactly what I mean Miss. Trinket." He pushed a button and called in the head of his elite squad. "I want every victor from every district brought in for questioning immediately. You may hold the victors from Districts One, Two and Four in the upper level rooms. The rest are to be brought downstairs. There is to be no one outside of the Capitol allowed to roam our city from this moment on. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!" The guard left and began barking orders into a band on his wrist.

"I believe it's time I gather the rest of my officials." He pressed one button and in an instant multiple voices were speaking at once. "Ladies and Gentlemen," the president barely raised his voice. "There will be a meeting in two hours to discuss our nations current state. Do not be late." He clicked all of them off. "Now, if you'll join me." He led her into the room with Viggo. "Mr. Bettes, you remember Miss. Trinket, do you not?"

"Effie? Have they hurt you? She's done nothing. She never wanted to use that room. It was the other escorts that used it, not her."

"Oh so chivalrous, Viggo," Effie smirked. "Coming to my aid when you can barely take care of yourself?"

The president arched a brow in pleasure. "Would you like to help Miss. Trinket Mr. Bettes?"

"Yes. I would." Effie almost felt pity for the man who was actually trying to defend her while he was bleeding and bruised.

"Then tell me," the president continued, "Who was part of the elaborate escape plan this evening?"

"What escape plan?" A Peacekeeper pushed one of the long handles into Viggo's side thus giving him an electrical jolt through his system.

"Please Viggo," Effie pleaded as though her life depended on it, "Tell them what they want to know."

"I...I don't know about an escape plan," Viggo choked as he got another jolt of electricity sent through him.

"Tell me about the rebellion," President Snow strolled in front of him as though on a Sunday walk.

"There's someone high up in the Capitol that's a member of the rebellion...we have a traitor code name orange blossom that's been feeding us information..."

*"Useless information!" Snow quickly snapped. "Don't tell me what I already know. Tell me what **you** know."*

"Mr. President, I only know what I've been told during our meetings. I'm unsure why you think I...aaah!" Another jolt.

*"You **are** the someone high up in the Capitol that we've been searching for aren't you Mr. Bettes? That member of the rebellion that none of us could find until your rebel ways began to show during the Games," Snow pressed his handkerchief to his lips. "A shame really," he gave his head a little nod and lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin as he watched Viggo's feet shuffle on the floor while both Peacekeepers gave him electrical jolts. "I had such high hopes for you."*

The smell of singed hair, blood and roses filled Effie's nostrils. She didn't have the stomach for this sort of thing. This wasn't what a lady of proper breeding was brought up to do, but after an hour and a half of questioning Viggo, torturing him and getting nowhere, Viggo asked a question that turned all eyes towards Effie. "Sir," Viggo barely croaked out, "I will admit to my need for power, but why would I destroy the very country I wanted to run? I had no emotional ties to these tributes. Isn't there someone else you can think of here that did? Someone that works for the Capitol that had a bond with the pair from District Twelve?"

President Snow slinked towards Effie who paid him no mind. Instead she tilted her head and reached for the courage that Katniss and Peeta possessed when they stepped onto their platforms and faced the arena. "I wondered how long it would last, Viggo. You pretending to protect me in front of our president, but it didn't take much for you to crumble, did it? How many times have you lifted a hand to me and expected me to put on a brave face...go to a party...put on a dress...face a camera..." she lifted her fingertips to her throat, "...even today, I was expected to just go about my business after you choked me, and walk around the Capitol smiling. It's not easy, is it? Do not try and take your last act of barbarism out on me by pretending that I am some form of high level official in the Capitol government, which you so obviously hate. I am an escort for the lowest district there is. I shall

no longer allow myself to be abused by you. I have gotten rid of one vile buffoon this evening and I will gladly rid myself of you too." She stepped back and addressed the president. "Sir, if you feel there is credence to his accusation then I will be more than happy to..."

"No, Miss. Trinket. You are absolutely right. Mr. Bettes has been taking out his hatred of the Capitol on you and you deserve just desserts." Snow turned towards a Peacekeeper and said, "Bag him."

Effie watched as a dark hood was pulled over Viggo's head. "Now what will happen to him, sir?"

"You'll kill him."

"Pardon me?" Effie was taken aback by his comment.

"Miss. Trinket, this man has caused you nothing but pain, hurt the people of the Capitol, is responsible for the breakdown of our nation's government. Are you telling me you have a problem ending his life?"

She was being tested and she needed to pass. "I have never taken a life before Mr. President, but for the sake of my country," she puffed out her chest, "I will stand by you and follow your orders." A Peacekeeper handed her a knife. "Well, what do you expect me to do with this? I am a lady of breeding. Not a pig farmer. Do you not have a more appropriate weapon?"

"I have a gun, ma'am. Have you ever shot one before?"

"Did you not just hear me say I am a lady of breeding?" Effie responded. "How difficult can it be. You aim the little barrel thingy and squeeze the trigger."

President Snow was almost laughing as he stepped outside. "I'll watch through the glass."

"Yes, that might be wise," Effie was trying desperately to block out the muffled cries of Viggo, wishing the president hadn't left the room so she could put an end to the war and just kill him herself right then and there. 'Haymitch,' she thought to herself, 'How I wish you were here with me. My vile little man, I need you so desperately right now.'

"Did you get that Miss. Trinket?" One of the Peacekeepers asked her.

"Yes, I think so." She held the gun out in front of her. It was quite light in the palm of her hand, it sent out a magnetic pulse that was quite deadly as long as Effie hit Viggo in the general vicinity of his heart, he'd be dead. "You are going to stand behind me so I won't be thrown backwards, correct?" The Peacekeeper had set the charge to wide spread.

"You shouldn't be thrown backwards ma'am, but I'll be happy to take up a position behind you," the Peacekeeper said with a look splayed across his face that said he almost felt bad for Effie.

"Thank you," Effie found herself being polite to the guards. It was bad enough she was going to take a life, being cruel on top of it to the gentlemen that were helping her seemed unnecessary. 'Do this, Effie. Peeta has been captured and you must get him out of the Capitol alive. Do this!' She squeezed the trigger and watched as Viggo Bettes, dedicated Capitol Official, died at the hand of a rebel for being a traitor to the country he loved. "Well," she handed the gun back to the Peacekeeper, "there we go," she dusted off her gloves. "Thank you gentlemen. Toodle ooh." She walked into the room with the president. "Do we have time...oh my, we have an audience." All of the officials had been watching the execution of Viggo Bettes through the looking glass. "Good evening one and all."

"Miss. Trinket, I'm sure you've met most of my staff at various functions with the late Viggo Bettles, however, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce you to them properly. Ladies and Gentleman, this is my newest personal assistant, Miss. Effie Trinket." President Snow gave her a nod of approval and maneuvered quickly around the room. "Would you like a moment before we start our meeting Miss. Trinket?" The president asked her privately.

Effie was about to say no, then remembered the computer she was currently hiding in her corset. "If you wouldn't mind. I would very much like to step into the ladies for a moment."

"Of course. I'll have one of my guards escort you there."

"Look at me, only this afternoon I was the escort, now I'm being escorted," Effie smiled at the president. "Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure."

The guard stood outside of the restroom while Effie bolted herself into the ladies stall and shoved her hand down her corset, her eyes constantly scanning the room, making sure no one was watching. She swirled her finger counterclockwise on the little mark Plutarch had showed her earlier in the evening then gingerly placed the computer back inside of her corset. It now had about thirty minutes of listening time. Whatever was going to be said in that room full of Capitol officials had better be good because Effie was wasting computer time on it. She gave herself a look in the mirror and said quietly, "Oh my goodness, so much has happened tonight. To think, that horrible district I worked for is being firebombed. I wonder if there will be any survivors when they're finally through. Oh well, such is life." She entered the meeting which was already in progress.

"I'm still not convinced he was the traitor!"

"Please. Please," Snow spoke in a calm tone, "Let's not act like the barbarians we are currently trying to prevent from taking over our nation."

"Sir, has orange blossom been able to get any information to us pertaining to the rebellion?"

"Unfortunately our inside contact has not been able to get deep enough into the rebels organization," Snow patted at the corner of his lips with his handkerchief. "We do need someone though...someone trustworthy to get inside."

"What about that sponsor Darlington? He owns a bar. Abernathy loves alcohol so maybe one of the others..."

"What does Haymitch have to do with this?" Effie asked.

All of the officials looked towards her as the president answered. "It seems that Mr. Abernathy has disappeared along with the female tribute from your district."

"And you're thinking he's part of the rebellion?" Effie nodded in agreement then added, "What does owning a bar have to do with anything? Because the man owns a bar that will automatically make him interested in becoming a rebel?"

President Snow along with a few others let out a little tuft of laughter.

"How about Julia from District Four? I hear her mother was quite the pastry chef in her day and she..."

Effie stood up and went for a cup of tea, "Yes, that's exactly who the rebels will trust, an escort from one of the districts they refer to as the

*Career districts and simply because the woman's **mother** could make a pastry she'll immediately bond with...whom? Peeta?"*

*"She has a point," Snow took the cup of tea she handed him out of her grasp. Effie was smart enough to find out from one of the servants how he took it before entering the room. "That's exactly what we need, someone who has earned their trust. Who can simply waltz right in and take up a spot in the rebellion." Oh, Effie knew she had planted the seed in his head, actually Viggo had planted it in **her**head, but it was imperative that Snow come up with the conclusion on his own.*

"Mr. President, where on earth are we to find someone like that? Someone they find trustworthy? Goodness knows the ideas being thrown around here are going to be as transparent as Viggo's lies." Effie lifted the pot of tea and poured herself a cup, never offering any of the officials any. She would not be their beck and call girl. She was there for President Snow and him alone.

"What if there were some truth to Mr. Bettes' lies?" Snow looked around the table to his group of officials. "The boy is quite fond of her," he let his eyes rest on Effie.

"What about Abernathy?" One of the official's asked.

"He's not here, what do we care about him?" Another said.

*"Wait a minute. Wait one minute." Effie held up her hand. "Are you suggesting that I...oh my..." She placed her fingers to her chest. "Peeta **is** quite taken with me, probably because he lacked a motherly hand growing up, though who could blame the woman? Look what she had for a son. Hmm... I could probably worm my way in with him, if he's part of it, and Haymitch...well, he's no problem for me. He and I have been at each others throats for over a decade. If I went to our*

suite as though nothing were wrong, met up with the rest of our team..."

"The rest of your team has been brought in for questioning Miss. Trinket," Snow informed her.

"Even better. Perhaps take me in for questioning too." She quickly turned to the president. "Nothing too much of course. Simple questions. I'd rather not have to face an inquisition like Viggo if you don't mind."

The room swelled with laughter. "Ah, Miss. Trinket your wit is quite refreshing. Yes, I do believe we could do that." Snow turned towards one of his officials. "Where did we take the stylist and her team?"

"They're in a suite on the third floor. We've questioned the...orange girl, but she wouldn't stop crying, so we threw her back in with the others. We didn't think you'd want us to question the head stylist without you sir." Effie heard the official say the orange girl and it made her think of the code name for the traitor, orange blossom. Could one of Peeta's prep team members be the link to the rebels? Is that why they were captured?

"Let's put Miss. Trinket in there with them," Snow suggested. "Would you like something to eat first or a drink perhaps? It's been such a long night."

"I think it would be best if I were to appear as though I had been going through royal, pardon my tongue, hell," Effie's eyes lit up and she bit back her smile. "Oh, sir. I do believe we can get this to work. Is there any word on Peeta yet? Is he alive?"

"We should find out, shouldn't we?" Snow made a motion with his chin towards an official who then got an update on Peeta's condition. They

were operating on him, but he'll live. "Has anyone checked on the status of District Twelve?"

"I'd be happy to, sir." An official pressed a few buttons and got the update. They were currently in the process of bombing the district and had rumors of stragglers heading into the woods. "Shall we place an order for the pilots to firebomb the woods Mr. President?"

"Of course not," Snow stood up from his spot at the table and spoke softly to her, "Sometimes Miss. Trinket I swear I'm surrounded by incompetence." He addressed the rest of the officials, "The last thing we need is hundreds of miles of woodland burning. I'm trying to preserve our nation, not burn it down."

"Yes, sir."

Effie was led to the room with Portia and her prep team, asked questions alongside of them, answered them the way the rebellion expected her to, ironically the way the Capitol wanted her too as well, and the moment Peeta was well enough she went to see him, bent over him and whispered in his ear. "No matter what happens, remember how much I love you my dear boy." She placed a kiss on his cheek and turned to leave stopping at the door when she heard his voice.

"Effie?"

"Go back to sleep, Peeta. They need you back on your feet by tomorrow."

"Okay, but...me too, Effie. Me too."

Effie's heart smiled a little when her boy told her he loved her too. "I'll be back tomorrow to escort you to your quarters. Until then, I want you to eat and drink as much as possible."

"Yes, mom," he said sarcastically, but full of love.

Effie bit back the tears when she heard him use the term of endearment. She wasn't allowed to tell him that his mother was dead. The president was going to be telling him that in due time. Effie reached the end of the medical bay and met up with a Peacekeeper. "Excuse me, would you mind escorting me back?" She headed for her new quarters with Portia and Annie as roommates. Her suggestion to Snow after the questioning she went through with them. A chance to get closer to the duo. It wasn't until Peeta was out of the medical bay and Snow decided to stop using the rest of the stylists at the Capitol, from that point on, he would be working Portia and her staff twenty-four hours a day until one of them cracked under pressure, that he ordered Annie to be taken to a prison cell. Effie hinted at keeping a good alliance with the people from the "Career" districts in case they were needed during the war and suggested that they stay in the Tribute Center, she'd be happy to remain an escort to both women if needed, but only Annie was in need of an escort. Enobaria had a guard posted at all times and was left alone. Yes, their country was now in a full blown war. Fighting all across the nation. Effie got to see many of the news reels that were meant only for official's eyes, but the second she got a moment of freedom with Peeta she pounced on him. "I have a second and that's all. I will be asking you how I can help to join your cause. You will insist that you are not a member of the rebellion. No matter what I do...what I say, you will never admit to it, do you understand me? I don't care if I'm practically dead. I will tell them that I have joined your group another way, but not through you. Do not admit to being a rebel or so help me, I will kill you myself,

Peeta Mellark." Effie couldn't help but notice the goofy grin on his face. "What are you smiling at?"

"You sound just like Katniss. Effie? Is she okay?"

"They got out. I don't know if she's alive or not, but," she gripped Peeta's hand in her own and smiled. "She's too stubborn to die. Peeta, I don't know how long I can protect you, they will..."

"I know," Peeta rubbed her hand with his. "You do what you need to and I'll do what I need to. Between the two of us, we should be able to..." he shrugged, "...I'm not sure...What do you think we can do? I make a mean french toast."

"I can perk an excellent pot of coffee," Effie grinned at him, "That settles it. My coffee, your french toast...Between Annie and Johanna's conversational skills, we're bound to set the social scene on fire."

Peeta let out a snort of laughter. "Thank God you're here."

Effie walked him into his old quarters at the Tribute Center. "I convinced them that you'd be more relaxed in a familiar environment." Darius stood waiting to care for his every need. "They gave you an Avox, but no attendants and you'll have Peacekeepers guarding each exit."

"Yeah, I kind of figured I wouldn't be allowed to wander around."

"The television is not off limits as a matter of fact, they are encouraging you to watch as much of it as you can this evening. Oh and there are cards." Effie walked to a drawer and took out a small box of unopened cards that came with each suite. "Looks like there's enough to build a skyscraper."

"Any paper...pencils?" Peeta asked.

"No. I'm afraid, nothing with a point or that might be made into a weapon."

"A pencil a weapon?" Peeta chuckled. "What am I going to do? Hold off the armed guards with a piece of led and wood?"

"I'm sorry, Peeta." Effie walked towards the elevator and told him the last bit of business. "One more thing. You have an interview with Caesar Flickerman tomorrow."

"You've got to be kidding me?"

"That would be why they'd like you to update yourself on the current events of our nation," Effie stood there and wished with all her might that she could take him, run with him and hide him away in the tiny room where they had so many meetings over the past year, but even that isn't a sanctuary anymore. "I shall see you tomorrow...before your interview. Portia will be here with your prep team bright and early."

"Yeah...okay." Peeta hung his head down. "Goodnight Effie."

"Have some manners young man. You address me properly when I'm leaving the room." She looked him straight in the eyes. "Not my feet."

"I apologize," he straightened up his posture and made eye contact with her. "Goodnight Effie."

"Much better. I realize that we have been faced with a difficult situation, but together we shall hold our heads up high and take pride in ourselves and the district we represent."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Goodnight Peeta." As Effie met with Portia that evening to go over Peeta's attire for the interview, they had five minutes together where no one was listening.

In those five minutes Portia learned what dangerous game Effie was playing, how much of herself she was risking, and Portia could no longer stand by and play makeup artist. When they were behind closed doors, in an area where the Capitol had portable cameras picking up conversations, Portia asked Effie quietly, "Effie, you care about Katniss and Peeta, don't you? Care about what happens to the children of this nation like them?"

'Oh, Portia,' Effie thought to herself, 'They will kill you...torture you first, then kill you.' "Yes, I do," Effie answered the way the Capitol needed her to.

"Then join us," Portia had a quiet desperation in her voice. "Help us. Cinna died for this cause."

"Cinna!" Effie whispered harshly. "You mean...Cinna was a...rebel?"

"Yes. He wasn't a thief. He was a rebel. He died so children could live...so Katniss and Peeta's child could live without the fear of having to face the arena at the age of twelve. Twelve, Effie." Portia was working her cause.

"They killed him...I stood up for you...you lied...I...I..." Effie sniffled. 'Make it sound good, but don't take too long. You need to join this cause.' "Katniss? What happened to her? Is she dead?"

"No. The rebels broke her out of the arena. She's alive and in hiding, but Effie, Peeta...he's so important...they both are and he trusts you. I know you can get him to join the rebellion."

"You mean he's not a member?" Effie was shocked...again. She was getting so good at this.

"Neither one of them are. They had no idea about any of this. They're just a couple of kids that fell in love, but their love..."

Effie couldn't keep it together no matter how hard she tried. Her voice cracked and tears began to fall. "Their love touched the world over didn't it?"

"Yes," Portia's tears joined hers. "Yes it did." They held hands. "Will you help us, Effie? Please? If not for this country...for Katniss and Peeta."

Effie nodded her head and said quietly, "Yes. I will. I shall help."

"Thank you," Portia mouthed to her when they heard a door open, then walked into the bathroom to clean up.

Effie had infiltrated the rebellion at President Snow's request. She had Annie under protection and was in charge of Peeta's questioning, which meant she avoided as many beatings as possible when it came to him. She would sneak him medications and did her best trying to walk the fine line between rebel and Capitol Official. Effie's new title, Official Assistant to the President of Panem. She was now privy to more secrets than any rebel could possibly dream of. Each day she went to work hoping not to get caught in her web of lies and each night she prayed for Haymitch to come to her rescue. To save her before it was too late and she wound up digging herself into a hole so deep, she'd bury herself alive.

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"How you doin' down there?" The sound of Gale's voice echoed through the headset Katniss was wearing. She was holding back the tears, the guilt, the pain. Doing her very best to turn off her emotions as she walked through the streets of District Twelve's Town Square. "Katniss? Do you want me to come down there?"

"No," she snapped at Gale through the headset. "I'm fine, Gale. I just need some time, okay?" She was about to walk up to the bakery and instantly knew time wasn't what she needed. "Pops?"

"I'm here." It was like listening to a deeper, richer, older version of Peeta. "I'm right here," his father answered.

"You...can you..." Katniss swallowed. "Meet me in the village?"

"Sure thing."

Katniss began moving her lips, talking to Peeta as she did several times each day. "It's gone, Peeta. The bakery is gone, but your dad, he's alive. He saved my mom and sister. He saved your girls just like you asked him to and he's still watching over us, Peeta. He's still taking care of your girls till you come home." Katniss took one last look at the bakery and ran out of the Town Square and into an untouched Victor's Village. "What?" She stopped short at the stark contrast between the village and the rest of the district. Their district was full of charcoal, soot, ash and skeletons. Victor's Village was as pristine as the day she had moved into it. She turned in a slow circle, taking it all in and saw Peeta's dad standing in the middle of it waiting

for her. "Pops?" It was the name Peeta called his dad every now and then. Katniss hadn't felt comfortable calling the man dad, but Pops suited him. She ran to his outstretched arms and missed her own father...Peeta so much, but was more than grateful for this man, she sometimes wondered how she had gotten by so long without her own dad.

"Are you okay?" He kept his arm around her waist.

Katniss nodded. "Yeah. I saw it...the bakery. I don't ever want you to go there. Either one of you. Okay?"

"Okay," Bing walked her towards her house. "I'm going to wait out here while you go in."

"Don't you want to come inside with me?" Katniss asked.

"Actually, I was thinking I might stop by your mom's house...pick up a couple of things for her and Prim, maybe make things a little more like home for them."

"That would be nice," Katniss said. "Will you...be here when I get out?"

"Do you want me to be here?" Bing asked.

"I need you to be."

"Hey, Catnip? You guys okay?"

Gale's voice rang through her ears and it was the last thing she wanted to hear. "We're fine." She turned to her father in law, the man that had been a source of strength for her over the past two weeks and said, "Go ahead and go. I should probably do this myself anyway."

"If you need me, all you have to do is give me a holler," he gave her hand a squeeze. "Go on now. I'll wait till you get inside."

Katniss stood at her and Peeta's front door, it took a moment before she twisted the handle and walked inside, but when she did she was smacked in the face with a million memories...sounds, smells...conversations...

*"Katniss? Do you know where my sketchpad and charcoals are?"
Peeta called down to her while hanging over the upstairs railing.*

"Did you look in the spare room where all the rest of your art supplies are?" Katniss called up to him.

"Of course I did, but they're not there."

"Then I have no clue where they are. You must've left them somewhere."

*"Me?" Peeta stormed down the hall then back again. "I can't find them anywhere! This is crazy, Katniss! Are you sure **you** didn't do something with them?"*

"Yes, Peeta," she said flatly. "You found me out. I'm secretly hiding your charcoals and sketchpad in my wild plot to drive you slowly insane. Next week I'm moving onto my next phase and hiding the nutmeg!"

She ran her hand across a kitchen chair and noticed that there was barely any dust settled on their furniture. Was it in case someone from the Capitol came to their district for a news story and they needed a proper place to stay? Katniss was tempted to walk through their home and completely trash the thing. The thought of someone staying in their home irked the hell out of her. She walked through their kitchen

and opened up their pantry. The scents that filled her nostrils were more than she could handle. Tears filled her eyes as she lifted the bottle of cinnamon up and held it to her chest.

"What would it take to convince you to come over here and bake with me?" Peeta's head tilted down, his hair was hanging in his eyes...a few curls stuck to his temples from the sweat that had collected at his brow.

Katniss lifted her cup of tea to her lips and sipped. "Depends on what you're baking."

"Pita bread."

She hadn't meant to choke on the tea she was sipping, but she did. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, why?" He asked.

"I just..." she bit her lip. "Didn't that ever bug you? Being named after bread?"

"Oh, it pissed the hell out of me, but what was I going to do? Tell my dad his family's traditions were stupid?"

"No...I guess not. Why are you making pita bread?" Katniss asked.

"Your mom is roasting some lamb, Prim made cheese and has been working on that yogurt for awhile now, my dad picked some produce...I needed cucumbers for this particular dish. See," Peeta greased a pan, "Effie used to send me all sorts of books about foods and cultures... I learned a lot about different heritages, backgrounds on certain types of foods...recipes and stuff and tonight we're trying something new. That's why we need the pita bread."

Katniss sauntered up to Peeta as he mixed some batter. "I've never had pita bread before. Is that what's in it?"

"This isn't pita bread. This is that coffee cake you like. I wanted to make sure I made you something you liked first."

Katniss had a look of surprise on her face. "Let me get this straight, our entire family, Haymitch..."

"The Hawthorne's are coming over for dinner too."

*"Gale's family...all these people are going to be coming over for dinner and you need pita bread for it, but you've opted to bake **me** a cake first?"*

"Well...yeah. You always come first, Katniss."

Katniss reached for the bottle of dill and moved her lips, "I miss you. So much." She walked towards their living room and saw a picture of them that Effie had brought with her when she came for the wedding shoot. It was taken when Katniss and Peeta weren't posing for the camera at the end of the Victory Tour, the night that Peeta proposed to her. Katniss remembered the moment the photo had been captured.

"Look at all these people?" Peeta hadn't let go of her hand the entire night. "Do you think they even realize this isn't normal behavior?"

"Probably not," Katniss was tired of dancing. "What are the chances of us getting out of here?"

"Slim to none, bordering on the none," Peeta looked around the banquet hall. "I can try and hide you for a few minutes if you like?"

"You'd do that for me?" Katniss could feel her heart palpitating when she looked at him. He was really handsome and he was all hers.

"Sure I would." Peeta took her hand and led her to a corner of the banquet hall behind the servant's station. "See? We can just hide behind these trays they're getting ready to bring out." Peeta leaned against the wall and rested her in his arms. "I almost wish there was a cave around here so we could be alone."

Katniss let herself relax against his shoulder and lifted her eyes to his, "With water dripping down the dark stone walls."

Peeta tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and moved closer to her. "I was so in love with you...I wanted to tell you so badly, but...gosh, Katniss, I was so scared."

"Yeah, I was scared too, but not anymore." They just stood there, looking at each other. His head resting against the wall, hers against his shoulder. His fingers still brushing back strands of her hair, her hand cupped around his bent elbow.

Katniss picked the picture up off of their mantel and studied it. She remembered Peeta telling her once that he wanted to stop time and live in a moment forever. That's what the picture reminded her of. Time stopping. Around Katniss and Peeta was a swirl of imagery, a blur of people dancing, eating, working and in the center of it all she and Peeta were perfectly still, caught up in nothing but one another. "I'll bring this with me so when you come to Thirteen it'll be like home," she continued her conversation with Peeta. Katniss walked to the closet and took out her game bag and placed the photo inside as well as the bottles of spices. There were a few other things she needed to get. Her father's jacket was still there and she had to bring that back with her. Pajamas. "You'll want those and...well, I'll feel better if I'm sleeping in your shirts. Plus I want a few of your sweaters." Katniss walked upstairs to their bedroom and rifled through their bedroom drawer and then she saw it...her sketch. "Here it is. I'm definitely

bringing this with me and...I don't care what they say, I'm bringing your paints. They can just go piss up a tree if they don't like it." Katniss placed the sketch of them inside of the leather binder in the game bag. "This thing is getting full. Good thing your dad is getting Prim and mom's stuff." She went into their bathroom and took the three bottles lavender body wash Peeta was so fond of, wrapped it in a towel and held onto it, then put in the unwrapped bars of soap he loved so much. "Got your favorites. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone where I'm hiding it and I've got some good hiding spots out there. I've found a ton of places to hide over the past couple of weeks." She headed to her dressing room for one last thing, a box. It was the only design left from Cinna's collection. It was a special one that Katniss had never touched. She didn't have the heart to. "You never knew about this one. Cinna didn't design this one because Snow told him to. He did this one for us...because he loves us and when you come home...well, you'll see it then, but I'll tell you what's it's called. He named it, 'Wedding Night,' and...well, you're just going to have to come home if you want to see it." Katniss walked into their bedroom and sat on the edge of their bed, set the box down and curled onto her side, holding Peeta's pillow up to her face, taking in as much of his lingering scent as she could. "I can't cry. I'm not allowed to get upset...I mean I'm allowed, but..." she took a few cleansing breaths and tried to remind herself why she had to stay calm. How important it was for her to keep her emotions in check.

Katniss could see Justus and Dr. Valero signing back and forth to one another and then heard a woman's voice tell Justus to leave.

"Are you telling me that baby is still alive!"

"Yes ma'am," Dr. Valero sounded so pleased and Katniss almost let out a sigh of relief when she heard the strange woman's response to Dr. Valero.

"You'll need to abort it."

"Excuse me!"

"You heard me. I said abort the child. Miss. Everdeen is no good to this..."

"Mrs. Mellark." Dr. Valero corrected the woman.

Katniss was just lying there in a state of shock. She had no clue who this person was telling Regina to kill her baby but she was already making a mental plan to kill her.

"Mrs. Mellark...Miss. Everdeen...I don't really care what the girl is going by these days. All I care about is the state of the uprising in this country. That young lady is a vital part in winning this war and she will not be able to go out and fight if she's pregnant."

"President Coin, that isn't your choice to make."

*"Isn't it?" Katniss squinted and saw the woman Regina called President Coin walk to another end of the room. "It is **my** job to lead the people of the districts to freedom and right now they're looking for the Mockingjay. Unfortunately she's lying in **your** hospital bed fighting to keep an unborn child alive. She's young. She'll be able to have another child. Abort the baby and tell her she had a miscarriage."*

"I...I don't think I can do that."

"Not a problem. We have other physicians here in Thirteen. They don't all have your training, but I'm sure they'll be able to leave her with the ability to reproduce. After all, we are quite fond of children here. I shall contact one of my other doctors immediately and..."

"No." Regina placed a hand over her own pregnant belly and said, "No. I'll take care of it. I'll do it."

"NO!" Katniss sat up screaming. "You can't! You can't kill my baby!"

"Katniss, I'm President Coin." She walked closer to her. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Dr. Valero did everything she could to save your child."

"No." Katniss tried to get out of bed and found she was strapped into it. "I heard you! You want it dead!"

"You don't know what you're talking about Katniss," Dr. Valero walked up to her. "You lost the baby...had a miscarriage. No one wanted the baby to die. We tried to save it."

"No! I heard you two talking! I heard you!"

"I think she's confused again Dr. Valero." President Coin shook her head sympathetically.

"Katniss I'm going to sedate you. You have to rest."

"The baby!" She didn't know what was happening anymore. Was it true? Did she lose the baby or was the doctor going to abort it? "No." Katniss could feel the medication the doctor shot into the tube attached to her veins putting her to sleep. "I'm not wrong...am I?" She looked pleadingly into the eyes of the doctor.

"Rest Katniss. You'll feel better when you wake up."

Katniss inhaled one last time, taking in as much of Peeta as she possibly could then went to his art studio. Before she even entered the room she could smell it. Blood and roses. "Snow." She knew he wasn't there. There was a team of men and women that searched the district prior to her arrival. They watched the area for seventy two hours to

make sure no one from the Capitol had any cloaked hovercrafts in the area and finally President Coin agreed to let Katniss walk through District Twelve. Katniss opened up Peeta's art studio and looked around the room. It appeared to be unscathed, but looks were deceiving. She eyed each painting then found the source of the stench. The mutt version of Gale had a long stemmed white rose placed in a crystal fluted vase right in front of it. Peeta had told her that was Snow's favorite portrait. Katniss snatched the vase and stomped down the stairs, threw the crystal in the fireplace and lit the rose on fire. "You bastard!" She went to the kitchen sink and scrubbed her hands, the scent wouldn't come off. Blood...roses...blood...roses...blood...blood... "BLOOD!" She picked up the closest pot and threw it across the room causing a loud crash.

"Catnip! You okay?" Gale asked.

"Katniss!" Bing's voice rang through the headset.

A screeching noise came from an area close to where the pot landed. "You! What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Katniss?" Her front door flew open.

"Hey Pops, look who's here." Katniss reached down to scratch between Buttercup's ears and the cat arched its back and hissed at her. "I can still cook you if I want to!"

Bing let out a sigh and said, "Nice to see some things haven't changed."

"Where's that pot?" Katniss started looking around the room.

"What do you need a pot for? You're not actually going to cook him are you?"

"So I can knock this straggly thing unconscious and bring it to Prim." Katniss picked up the pot off the floor.

"Or we could just put him in a pillowcase," Bing suggested.

She shrugged. "I'd rather hit him over the head."

"How about I get a pillowcase instead?"

"I'll get the case." Katniss looked at the cat. "I need you to get something else for me."

"What's that?"

"Peeta's paint supplies. I can't go back in that room," Katniss swallowed the lump in her throat. "I left a few other things upstairs too. My game bag...a box on my bed...a towel with some stuff in it."

"I'll take care of it." As Bing walked up the stairs Katniss heard him talking to Gale. "She's fine. Just ran across a...pest."

Another stipulation to Katniss coming back to twelve was that she had to keep an open line of communication with the hovercraft at all times. Gale was the person President Coin agreed to, he'd become quite active in the rebellion since coming to Thirteen, but Katniss insisted on Bing being part of it too. He on the other hand turned down all of the offers from Coin and refused to join the rebellion. Said his job was to protect Peeta's girls. When he was assigned living quarters several flights below Prim's and her mother's, Katniss had a fit and insisted that he be moved next door to them. She also insisted that she be provided her own quarters for her and Peeta. When he came back, she'd have to have a home ready for him and she wasn't going to be scrambling at the last minute to get something ready. She wanted to walk him to their quarters and say, welcome home. The Everdeens

and the Mellarks now had three adjoining residencies. When Gale suggested that his family move closer to her, Katniss said she had already caused enough trouble. She didn't know why Gale was getting on her nerves lately, but he was. Maybe because he was so gung ho about this rebellion or because he was constantly wanting to do things for her, things Peeta would normally do. The one thing that really got under her skin was that the doctor told him not to tell her about Twelve and he completely disregarded her medical advice. Katniss had almost lost the baby that day. It wasn't Gale's fault, she knew that, but he was so damn hard headed, he just couldn't see past his own perspective. The funny thing was, Katniss used to be exactly like him, still was in a lot of ways, but the baby...it changed her.

"Ready to go?" Bing asked her.

"Yup. I'll give you the honor of capturing that...thing," she motioned towards Buttercup.

As they stood in the center of Victor's Village Katniss knew there was one more place she had to see. She climbed up into the hovercraft, Gale's hand reaching for the pillowcase that held the howling cat, "I can see why you had to come back here now."

"Shut up," Katniss said dryly. "Help him out with the rest of that stuff will you?" She walked up towards the pilot and asked, "Can you get close enough to the school for me to see something?"

"Sure. Anything in particular?"

"Yeah, there's a big oak tree that stands a good distance away from it, but it's still considered part of the school's property." Katniss told him.

"Want to sit up here with me and tell me if you see it?"

"Can I?" Katniss asked. The pilot nodded. It didn't take long for them to head in that direction and when they did her heart jumped for joy. "It's still there. Do you see it?"

"Looks like they didn't even touch the school," the pilot commented.

"Can you let me down by that tree? See it?" Katniss was pointing at it and practically jumping up and down in her chair.

"Did anyone sweep this area?" The pilot asked Gale.

"I don't know. Pretty sure they searched the whole district. They wouldn't have let her come back here unless they did," he answered.

"Just let me down!" Katniss was getting up, paused at Bing and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "It's our tree, Pops. Our tree!"

"Let her get out," Gale gave her a little grin. "Want me to..."

Katniss was heading down the ladder before Gale even finished his sentence. "Peeta, look!" Once her feet hit the ground, silence took over. "There's so much I have to tell you. So much I need to share." She walked under the tree and sat next to it, closed her eyes and imagined he was next to her. It was lunchtime and she was retelling him one of her tales.

Katniss woke up in a dimly lit hospital room with the doctor by her side. President Coin, Haymitch and Plutarch were all standing in a corner talking amongst themselves and then she heard Haymitch's voice. "There she is. Hey there sweetheart."

"H...hi," her throat was so dry.

"Don't try to talk yet, Katniss," the doctor told her. "Lavinia, would you mind getting her some water please?"

"Katniss, it's good to see you again. Remember me?" Plutarch tried to smile at her, but even he couldn't fake it under the circumstances. Katniss just nodded.

"We're thrilled that you're doing better," President Coin was the only person in the room that didn't look affected in the least or sound genuine for that matter. "You gave us a bit of a scare there."

"Wh..." Katniss shook her head a little.

"Let us explain what has happened over the past few days Katniss," Dr. Valero sounded very businesslike instead of warm and friendly like normal.

Katniss sipped from the cup Lavinia held to her lips and listened as she was told about the bombing of District Twelve by Haymitch. The loss of her baby by Dr. Valero. Her mental disorientation also by the doctor and confirmed by the plastic bracelet she was now wearing. She sat and listened, but didn't believe it. She couldn't believe it.

"No," Katniss shook her head. "I'm pregnant. I know I am."

Haymitch ran his hand down his face and said, "Show her doc."

The doctor took one of the fetal monitoring devices they used in District Thirteen and placed it above Katniss' abdomen. Above her the image of an empty womb was displayed in the air. "I'm sorry, Katniss," Dr. Valero said softly. "We tried our best, but your body just went through too much."

They had just told her that she lost the baby and Katniss felt the room start to spin. She needed her husband, she needed Peeta. "Peeta," she mouthed. "Banana nut is..." her eyes filled with tears and an electronic bracelet on her other wrist began to beep.

"I'm sorry, I'll have to ask you all to leave now," Dr. Valero spoke to the group of people that were standing around Katniss. "Lay back."

Katniss was moving her lips frantically, staring into space as everyone left the room. Once they were all gone she felt the doctor's lips against her ear. "Your baby's alive, but you must calm down or we'll lose it. Please Katniss. Trust me."

"Wha..." she breathed out.

"I can't explain until we're certain everyone has gone, but you need to calm down. That device you're wearing on your wrist is monitoring your baby's vital signs. It's telling me whether or not its heart rate is getting too low, which it is. Now, lie down and let me help you."

Katniss did everything the doctor told her to and somewhere around three in the morning Justus and Regina woke her up. Justus kept watch over the door, Lavinia lay under the covers as though she were Katniss and had the blankets pulled up over her head and Regina took Katniss into a dark closet that held medical supplies.

"Dr. Valero, what's going on? Did you mean it when you said the baby was fine?" Katniss asked her.

"Before we go any further, lean back," the doctor took out a palm sized device and placed it over Katniss' stomach. "I brought this with me from the Capitol. Effie Trinket..."

"You know Effie?"

"Yes, she asked me to take care of you...she's had me taking care of you since you went into the arena," Regina told her.

Katniss smiled. "This is her grandchild, you know? She adopted Peeta as her son."

"She thinks of both of you as her children," Regina showed Katniss a button. "See this? That's how you turn this on. It's the only one in Thirteen so you must take care of it."

"You want me to keep it?"

"Yes. If anyone here gets their hands on it, they'll know about your baby and we don't want that. You see, Effie was afraid that you might be taken advantage of during the uprising. I didn't understand why at the time, not until I realized what you and Peeta meant to this war. You're both very important to this rebellion, however, President Coin can't in good conscience use a girl that is with child to fight. That would make her look just as bad as...as..."

"As a president that puts a pregnant woman in the arena," Katniss finished for her.

"Yes, I suppose so. Go ahead and push that button," The doctor urged her with a small smile on her face.

Katniss could feel her pulse racing, her finger was shaking as she touched the button on the hand held device and then the image of her and Peeta's baby shone above. "Banana nut," she whispered.

"I'm going to teach you how this works so you can keep an eye on your little one, but you must keep this to yourself. There are only four of us that know about this child now and we must keep it that way," Regina warned her.

"Five," Katniss whispered. "Peeta knows. He knows and when he comes back, I won't lie to him and tell him..."

"Of course you won't. We'll tell him the truth, but that's it, Katniss. If we tell anyone else, we'll be risking our lives," the doctor ran her hand over her own baby.

"I wouldn't do that to you...I'd never hurt your child." Katniss found a kinship with this woman, this doctor that worked for the Capitol that Effie Trinket trusted with her care. This physician was going through much of the same thing Katniss was, the sickness, the worry, she understood what it was to be responsible for the wellbeing of a life that was growing inside of you. "Why do they think I lost the baby?"

The doctor let out a breath and confirmed Katniss' suspicions from the other day. The president did in fact order the child to be aborted so Katniss could take up her role as the Mockingjay, but Regina had become a doctor to preserve life not end it. "Effie had her suspicions about the woman and so did my husband, I guess now we all know the truth and we're stuck with the lesser of two evils, but Katniss there is a catch here...as much as I hate to say this...you are going to have to fill your role as the Mockingjay eventually."

"I won't help that woman," Katniss ran her fingertip around the baby's heart and moved the picture closer to her. "How do I listen to this?" The doctor showed her the button to push. "Is it still too soon to find out if it's a boy or girl?"

"Yes. That will take several more weeks. When it's time the word gender will appear in the bottom left hand corner. If you touch it, it will display the baby's gender for you."

Katniss nodded. "I should shut this off now." She carefully tucked the device away in her pocket and thought she'd have to go on a search for a hiding spot very soon. "You said there are four of us that know?"

"Justus, Lavinia, you and me," the doctor answered. "Outside of us...I just don't think we should trust anyone else."

"What about Gale?"

"You mean Mr. Hawthorne?" The doctor's face turned to stone. "I'm sorry, I'd have to insist you keep this information from him as he's working quite closely with the rebellion now. Justus has just been invited to join their group and will no longer be working as closely to me as I'd like, but Lavinia is proving to be quite the nurse and I'm teaching her as much as I can, she'll be very helpful."

There was something bothering Katniss. "Dr. Valero. You showed me an image...all of us an image earlier and there was nothing inside of me. How did you do that?"

"The equipment here is a bit, outdated, shall we say. It was simple enough to substitute Lavinia's medical schematics for yours. When they use any form of monitoring system on you it will automatically show Lavinia's system." Regina smiled. "I was able to fool the Capitol into believing my husband was dead for years Katniss, this was a piece of cake."

"Thank you." She wanted desperately to hug the woman. "I'm not sure how long we're going to be able to hide this, but..."

"By the time they find out, Peeta will be back and they'll have their Jabberjay. They won't need you to go out and fight. Besides, you're quite petite. I can't imagine you'll be showing for awhile. I didn't start showing until the middle of my fourth month."

"How far along are you?"

"Five months," she smiled. "We're having a boy."

"Can you believe it, Peeta? The people we thought were so great...fighting to save the children of our country... Yeah," she rolled her eyes as she leaned her back up against the oak tree, "the, oh so wonderful president that wants to take Snow's place, had no problem killing our child just so I could be a figurehead." She lifted her eyes up to the spot where their initials were carved. "I'm supposed to agree to it. Haymitch keeps pestering me about it, he says the sooner I agree to it, the sooner they can get you and Effie out of there, but Justus told me that has nothing to do with it. They have yet to come up with a plan or proof that any of you are alive except for Effie. Effie..." Katniss sighed. "That woman has done a lot more than I gave her credit for. You have no idea all of the things she's gotten into Peeta or maybe you do. Have they found out about her? Haymitch says no, but I worry about her too. Finnick has been freaking out over Annie, and Beetee... you wouldn't believe it. They literally wheeled his hospital bed down to their...I don't know what room, the moment he could sit upright. I haven't seen him in over a week. As for me and the baby, we're good. I still wear the bracelet around my wrist but it hasn't gone off in awhile. The doctor told Coin it monitors my vitals, blood pressure...heart...stuff like that, but it really keeps an eye on our little one. She's pretty smart that doctor of mine. Has put allergy alerts on my medical record so I won't have to eat the same as the rest of these people...like hot grain. She even adjusted something in the computers so I get more food than Gale." Katniss started to laugh, "You have to see our trays when we go to eat at the dining hall. He always looks at my tray like he's the one that should've gotten served my portion. She gave me something for the morning sickness so I won't keep throwing up, but we're running low on it and pretty soon I won't be able to hide it. I told her I could have your dad sneak me a piece of food before each meal, he works in the kitchen alongside Greasy Sae, but for now, he still doesn't know about the baby. I'd rather keep it that way. I really don't want to put his life in danger and...it broke his heart when he thought

the baby died. He blamed Gale for it. Yelled at him, screamed at him...it was horrible Peeta. Your dad went through so much pain. Losing you...your brothers and then the baby...he started shaking Gale and screaming at him and Gale just kept saying he was sorry. He didn't mean it then..." Katniss sniffed a little, "then Pops he...he uh...he just pulled Gale into one of those hugs. You know the kind and started telling him how sorry he was. That it wasn't Gale's fault, it was the Capitol's and he was just reacting to the events that happened. Poor Pops. He's better now though and he must've made up with Gale because they get along really well. Then again your dad gets along with everybody." Katniss closed her eyes and rested her head against the oak tree. She tried to imagine Peeta sitting behind her...resting her head against his chest and not the bark of a tree. "Did I tell you that Effie hand picked Dr. Valero to take care of me in the arena. She's the one that sent in that nerve medicine for me, which saved the baby's life by the way. Turns out I did have some nerve damage from that gas. Effie...I think Haymitch is sort of lost without her. I've seen him, though I try not to...he's just lied too much to us, and every time I see Haymitch, he's got this look on his face. Plutarch said it's because they don't allow alcohol here, but it's more than that. Finnick and I were talking one afternoon when they moved me from a private room in with the rest of them and he said, 'Haymitch has that same look we do, Katniss. He's lost someone he loves.' I don't know if Finnick was talking about Maysilee or Effie, but...I kind of have a feeling it's Effie. Can you imagine that? Haymitch actually loving our Effie? Then again, who wouldn't love her? She's pretty amazing."

"Hey, Catnip, we've got to head out soon." Gale's voice just kept grating on her nerves.

"A few more minutes," she snapped. "Oh, Peeta, I don't know what to do about Gale. I'm so mad at him and for the life of me I don't know why. He's been really nice to me...too damn nice. It's like he's trying to

fill your shoes or something and I hate it. I mean why would he do that? Why would he try and take care of me when he knows you're the only man I'll ever love?" Katniss picked up a twig and threw it.

She could almost hear Peeta's voice telling her, *"Because I asked him to take care of you while I was gone, Katniss."*

"Well, I don't want him to. I don't need a man to take care of me. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." Katniss crossed her arms and felt a familiar surge of anger flooding through her.

"You know I love that feisty side," Peeta's voice spoke softly to her in her mind.

"Then you must be head over heels with me lately," she stood up, dusted the earth off of her bottom, ran a quick hand across her lower abdomen and bid him goodbye. "Okay...Jabberjay...time for you to fly home. I'm sick of hiding our baby and sick of living in Thirteen without you. I just wish I knew for certain if you were alive or not. Everyone is just making assumptions. If only I knew..."

"Catnip. We've got to get back. Beetee said the Capitol is going to be showing a broadcast in a few hours and Coin wants us there for it."

"Seems I'm being beckoned," she ran her hand across the rough bark of the oak tree. "I love you, Peeta," those were the only words to him that actually went out through the headset for the others to hear. "Stay alive." She gave it a thought then said, "You better be alive or I swear I'll come to the Capitol and kill you myself." As Katniss climbed the ladder to enter the hovercraft she looked into the eyes of her friend, Gale and wondered if he was doing what Peeta asked or acting on his own behalf. She was going to have to ask him. She fiddled with the bracelet that said, 'mentally disorientated,' then felt the warmth of a caress lightly brush across her cheek. She closed her eyes and

breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. "Peeta," she moved her lips. 'Can you feel me?' she wondered and in that moment she sent out as much love as she could to help ease whatever pain he was going through without her.

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The floor of the cell was like ice. The sounds coming through the tiny window above Peeta's head were of Johanna being tortured...beaten...dunked into a tub of ice water until it felt like her lungs were going to explode. He held his hands over his ears and rocked back and forth trying to remind himself of the the girl...'What was her name?' He asked himself. 'I don't remember your name, but I know you...know you so well, don't I? I can't remember what you look like,' his mind was reaching for her face. 'Follow your fingers. You've sketched her before. Trace the outline of her cheeks...her jaw...her nose...' He could see it now, '...you have freckles. Twelve of them across the bridge of your nose.' Peeta sighed and imagined himself cupping her cheeks in his hands. Cradling her face, tucking the loose strands of hair behind her ear...

"Let's go!" The sound of a Peacekeeper dragging Johanna back and tossing her into the cage next to his broke Peeta from his spell.

He waited until the guard was out of sight and then scampered across the dusty concrete floor. "Johanna," he whispered. "Are you okay?"

The sound of her teeth chattering echoed through their cells. "Hey, cccinnamon bbbunss. Wh...what's sh...shaking? Other th...than me?"

Peeta stripped his shirt from his body and handed it to her through the bars. "Here. Take it."

"No. Not after the last ttime."

Peeta had gotten beaten after the last time he gave her his shirt and then they brought him in for surgery to help stitch up his wounds and heal his broken bones, giving him just enough medication to keep him still, but not enough to knock him out. He felt everything. "I don't care, Johanna. Take it."

"Well, I cccare. I won't use it, so put it bbback on."

"Look, I haven't had anything to drink for hours and I'm parched. Dry your hair with it and then I can squeeze my shirt into my mouth...you know...quench my thirst," Peeta made a lame attempt at a joke, which actually brought a small smile to Johanna's dirt streaked face.

"Sorry. I'm drinking the water out of my own hair today." She scooted back into a corner. "Have they brought you anything to eat?"

"No, but I saw a mouse earlier and I'm working on a plan to lure it into my cell...try and catch it. Maybe we'll feast tonight." Peeta slipped the shirt back on and sat against the wall of his cell. "They'll have to feed us something soon or else we'll starve to death and they haven't gotten any information out of us yet so..."

"I'd rather they just let me starve." Johanna rolled her head towards Peeta. "Then again, who would keep you company after your wonderful treatments if they did that? So...do you remember anything about her?"

"About who?" Peeta asked. Since they started pumping stuff into his veins his memory wasn't what it used to be. The majority of the time he was in his cell he was lethargic, trying to keep track of basic things.

"Fireball" Johanna sounded so disappointed.

"Fireball?" Peeta sat for a minute then said, "Sounds familiar. Do I know her?"

"Yeah," Johanna let out a sigh. "You know her. Your wife...mother of your child...pain in my ass...any of this ringing any bells?"

Peeta shook his head trying to figure out if Johanna was serious about him being married and expecting a kid. He didn't think she was right about that. Surely he'd remember something as important as being a husband and a father. "You sound tired Johanna. Maybe you should get some rest. I'll keep an eye out for that mouse." His eyes scanned the dark and murky jail cells in hopes of finding any form of nutrients. At this point a spider would've been a welcome meal, but he saw nothing. Eventually he allowed his mind to float back to the image of the girl he was sketching in his mind. She was the only thing keeping his mind off of his next scheduled beating. He could see her now. Long dark hair, bright silver eyes looking at him like she knew his every secret and then he could hear her voice.

"I love you, Peeta." He didn't know if it was real or not, but it made him feel better knowing she was there with him. She was taking care of him. Stroking his hair while he rested his head in her lap. Above her were the leaves of a tree surrounded by the blue of the sky. *"I'll watch over you while you rest. Close your eyes and get some sleep. I won't leave you."*

He wanted to ask her what her name was, but somewhere inside he knew it, he just had to figure it out on his own. 'I'm so tired...hungry. I

don't want to do this anymore. I want to go home,' his mind began to get foggy from all of the drugs that had been pumped into his system.

"You will. We'll be together soon enough and when we are, we'll never let them separate us again."

Peeta took comfort in the girl's confidence. He believed her. As he allowed sleep to take over he finally remembered her name, "Katniss," he whispered.

Johanna looked at him as he fell asleep, with a smirk she said softly, "That's right Peeta. Some things you never forget."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 3: Message in a Bottle, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Two: Message in a Bottle

Katniss has been having a hard time dealing with her new life in Thirteen. Peeta has been having a hard time...period.

Thank you to S and A for their help and quick work on the betas. I really appreciate it.

Thank you readers for your kind words and for reading! Please remember you can subscribe to updates on my tumblr page, ask me questions, which I will answer (within reason) and get sneak peeks at upcoming chapters. [www dot jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://www.dot.jamiesommers23.dot.tumblr.dot.com)

Anyone want to see what's happening with...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Schedules, they seemed to be the norm in District Thirteen. Katniss walked with Bing back to the floor that held all of their quarters.

"Coming in?" She asked him before opening the door to her mother and Prim's room.

"Nah, you go ahead. I'm going to clean up before reflection time," Bing answered her. "Want me to help you drop your stuff off first?"

"Would you mind just dumping it on my bed? I'll take care of it during reflection. I think it'll be the perfect thing for me to reflect upon tonight," Katniss held onto the pillowcase that held Buttercup's still complaining form and a small box of items that Bing had collected for her mother and sister.

"I'll take care of it for you." He gave her a little squeeze. "Tell your mom and sister I'll walk them down for dinner tonight. It's kind of nice having the night off...not having to cook for the masses."

Katniss gave her father in law a little smile then entered her mother and sister's quarters expecting them to pepper her with questions. Fortunately the sound coming from the pillowcase eliminated any painful explanations of their former home. Katniss handed her mother the box and saw the wedding photo of her parents that Bing had packed up along with the book of plants that held so many of Peeta's sketches. She'd have to thank him for doing something so kind. He had done so much for her family and there was nothing left of his. Nothing but Peeta's girls.

She had intended on spending reflection, that was the time period District Thirteen designated for its residents to wind down after their day, in her own quarters, but found herself staying at her mother's instead. From the moment Katniss was released from the hospital she found the program in District Thirteen a bit on the strict side. Each morning you were supposed to stick your right arm in this contraption in the wall that tattooed a schedule of your day onto your arm in sickly purple ink. 7:00-Breakfast, 7:30-Kitchen Duties, 8:30-Education Center, room 17 and so on. The ink wasn't removable until 22:00-Bathing which is when the chemical compound would break down and wash away under running water, and unless you were on the night shift at 22:30 it was lights out. Katniss was able to get away with ignoring the schedules, so far everyone was leaving her alone. 'Thank God for her mentally disoriented bracelet,' she thought to herself on many different occasions, and everyone had to put up with her ramblings...her silent conversations with Peeta, but she knew that wouldn't last forever. Neither would their patience with the Mockingjay issue.

Katniss had decided to go down to dinner with the rest of her family, Peeta's dad included, they were all a family now, so when the knock on the door came, she didn't think twice when she shouted, "Come in."

"Hey," Gale smiled at Prim who had tied a blue ribbon around Buttercup's neck. "I see someone's being spoiled rotten."

The smile that Katniss almost had on her face from seeing Prim's joy was gone. She really had to work out this issue she had with Gale. "What are you doing here?"

"Our families were assigned tables next to each other tonight. Thought I'd walk you to dinner," Gale gave her mom a nod. "Hey, Mrs. Everdeen. Nice to see you."

"You too, Gale. I haven't seen much of you lately. Been keeping yourself busy?" She asked.

"They keep me fairly busy...yeah." Gale said proudly. By 'they' Katniss knew he meant the rebels. More people she was having an issue with. The only one of them that didn't really bother her was Finnick, and that's because he was as crazy as she was.

Katniss stood up and headed for the door. "I need to stop by my quarters before we go. I want to change."

"Into what?" Gale let out a chuckle. Everyone was assigned clothing in District Thirteen and it all looked alike. "A different gray shirt?"

"I brought some things back with me...some of Peeta's sweaters and things...I..." she didn't know why she felt tears burning in the back of her eyes, and then she realized, 'yes you do. It's because you're a hormonal mess, missing your husband, carrying a baby that no one knows about.' "I just want to change, okay!" She stormed out of their

room and into her own, slamming the door in Gale's face. She pressed her palms up against the door and saw the things her father in law had left on her and Peeta's bed. "Damn you, Peeta! Where are you?" Katniss opened up the game bag and pulled out one of Peeta's favorite sweatshirts and pulled it over her head. A combination of freshly laundered clothing and Peeta wafted around her. "I'm getting pretty pissed off with you right...ri..." she let herself fall to her knees, buried her face in her hands, which were covered with the soft fabric of his shirt and cried. She had made it the entire day without shedding a tear. Walked through their district, accidentally stuck her foot inside of someone's skull while walking through the meadow. Saw the remains of the bakery Peeta had grown up in...that his family probably died in. Smelled the stench of Snow's message in Peeta's art studio and walked through their home collecting little bits of their life in the hopes that it would bring them some form of temporary normalcy while living in Thirteen. She sat under their oak tree and allowed herself to relive the pain she had gone through when she thought she lost their baby, and she did all of that without cracking. Without once shedding a tear, but now she was alone. More than that she was lonely. "I hope you're happy. I'm alive and what are you? Dead? Being tortured? I almost wish you were dead." She hated herself for saying it, but when she thought of the things President Snow could be doing to him...death was so much more preferable. Katniss stood up and answered the knock at the door. "Hey, Pops," she sniffed and wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. "I'll be ready to go in a second."

"We need to head downstairs. They don't excuse us the way they excuse you for being late," he lifted her hand and cuffed one of her sleeves. "You take a few minutes if you need to, but I think you should come down with us. Your sister's worried and so is your mother. Gale thinks you're mad at him, but I told him, it was just a tough day." Bing cuffed the other sleeve. "What do you think? Want to come down with us?"

Katniss gave him a soft smile, "I have something for you." She walked to her bed and took out the picture of her and Peeta at the Victory Tour banquet. "Why don't you hold onto this for me while we're here?" Katniss handed it to him.

"I always loved this picture," Bing smiled as he took it from her hand. "Do you have a photo of him?"

Katniss lifted the locket and pressed it to her lips. "It never leaves me. Plus I have a sketch of us that he drew."

"If you'd rather I take the sketch and you..."

Katniss blushed and quickly said, "NO! No...the sketch is...well, it was a gift he drew for me." 'Plus,' she thought to herself, 'we're wrapped up in our bedsheets staring at each other.'

"Ah," Bing couldn't take his eyes off of the picture. "I'll only keep it till he gets back. Thank you, Katniss."

"Why don't you put it in your room and then I'll be ready to go," she felt better now. It gave her joy seeing the look of love on her father in law's face when he saw his son.

Gale leaned up against the door frame. "You made him pretty happy."

Katniss pulled her door closed and said, "Yeah. He needed a picture of Peeta."

"Weird how much they look alike, huh?" Gale commented.

"I don't know," Katniss shirked one of her shoulders. "I mean, they have a few features, but...There are a lot of differences between them. Their eyes are completely different and so is their hair."

"What are you talking about?" Prim chimed in. "They look exactly alike."

"No they don't," Evelyn agreed with Katniss. "Bing's hair is kind of a sandy blond...flips up at the ends and his eyes are more of a sky blue in color, but deeper surrounded by smile lines."

"Peeta's hair is curly at the ends and like a dusty blond," Katniss took hold of Prim's hand and said, "his eyes are so...bright...vivid...like a striking blue."

Gale and Prim exchanged curious expressions as mother and daughter described the exact same man only different ages.

"Sure...they're totally different," Prim said sarcastically.

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"There's a nightclub you can go to," Portia applied Effie's eyelashes and spoke softly, "you must look for a bartender. She'll help you get information to the rebels in the other districts."

"What am I to tell them?" Effie whispered knowing that the Capitol had placed a recording monitor on her days ago and now Effie was constantly being monitored. The only time it didn't work was when she was in the elevators or deep underground. "Do I ask for help? Tell them where you are?"

"Let them know that Peeta is alive, but barely. He's going to die if they keep on beating him the way you said they are and if he dies..."

"They'll have a martyr on their hands won't they?" Effie asked. "A young, pregnant girl, left without the father of her child..." she clucked her tongue. "I can't even imagine how this country would react to such a thing."

Portia dabbed a little powder on to Effie's face. "It sounds sick, but...it might be the best thing for this rebellion if they do let Peeta die. At this point, it would help more than it would hurt." Portia almost smiled.

"Snow's regime wouldn't last a week after that. I just hate to think of Katniss..." she blew out a breath. "Cinna always said that was my biggest downfall, caring too much about Katniss and Peeta, and not enough about all of the children of the world."

"I can see that about you dear. You always were very close to Peeta." Effie gave her hand a little pat. "However, I do not think I can condone allowing him to die for the sake of the rebellion. It seems so cold."

"But it might be necessary, Effie."

"If it comes to that, than I shall agree." Neither one of them would agree, but if Snow thought killing Peeta would help the rebellion then they would act like Peeta's death was just a casualty of war. Effie sat upright and gave herself a once over in the mirror. "You really are an artist, Portia. I look lovely, as usual." She turned to her friend. "How long has it been since you've slept?"

"I got a couple of hours yesterday, but they've been keeping my team busy round the clock...asking us questions when we're not working...or working us when they're not asking us questions. It won't last for long though. We don't know much of anything and no one can handle that kind of stress." Portia started putting her makeup kit away,

but her hands began to shake and one of her brushes fell to the ground. "See? Told you. No one can handle this kind of stress."

Effie bent over and picked up the makeup brush. "Dear, why don't you sit down. I'll pack up for you."

"If they find out, Effie..."

"I'll take my chances." She couldn't do it anymore. Watching everyone she loved be abused was more than she could handle. The only person that wasn't being tortured by President Snow was Annie. She'd be brought in for questioning every few days, but more often than not the girl just broke down in tears and was deemed useless. Effie's only reason for continually residing with her was to maintain the appearance of friendship amongst the districts. If District Four was with the rebellion, and by the state of the uprising in their area the Capitol was convinced they were, then Effie's alliance with the girl would be seen as helpful with her rebel friends. If for some strange reason District Four was loyal to the Capitol than caring for one of their own would show signs of compassion. The same went for District Two where Enobaria hailed from. Effie got sick to her stomach when she thought of the gold toothed woman. 'She deserves to be in a cell, not my Peeta.' "There we are," she said. "Everything's packed away. Nice and tight."

"Effie," Portia's frail hand held onto her arm. "You must get word out to the rebels through the districts. Let them know who's alive here in the Capitol. Where they're located. Your position here can be very helpful to us."

"I shall do my best," Effie assured her. It had been on her mind for days. She needed to tell Haymitch where they were, what they were doing, how to break into their compound... 'I'm more than ready for you to come back and get me now,' she thought on many different

occasions, but the portable recording device hidden in the brooch President Snow made her wear each day prevented her from accessing the computer that Plutarch had left for her. There was only one place she could risk using it and if this plan to get word out through the rebel's network didn't pan out, then she'd have no choice but to risk everything and hope someone was listening on the other end of the computer as she begged them to come and break them out of the Capitol. "I must go now, Portia. The president will be airing Peeta's spot very soon and then we'll be having a meeting in regards to our next steps."

"Yes." Portia stood up from the chair and held onto the edge of it to keep her balance. "I believe my team and I may actually get a small break during your meeting."

"I shall make sure you have a meal sent into your quarters." The only time any of these people ate, Effie was certain it was at her request. "Toodle ooh, darling." With a gentle squeeze of her friend's hand, she was on her way, stopping long enough to place an order with the guard for food to be brought into Portia's quarters for her and her staff.

"There she is now, Miss. Trinket," President Snow's greeting was always too chipper as far as Effie was concerned, but she met him with one as equally bright. "We were just watching your interaction with the stylist. "Brilliant. Your compassion for the woman...well for all of those people is truly remarkable."

"Sir," Effie placed her fingers against her chest, "I don't know how I'm able to swallow the bile that rises to my throat each time I am in their company." Ironically she was speaking about the people she was surrounded with.

"You're doing a fabulous job, Miss. Trinket," one of the officials said. "Now, we'll need to send that message, perhaps try and track the location of the...will it be a note...something verbal?" He asked Effie.

She shook her head, "This is a first for me," which it was. In the past, all Effie had to do was speak with Plutarch directly and he got word to President Coin herself. "Portia said a note."

"Yes, I heard that portion of the discussion between you and Peeta's stylist," Snow said. The man was constantly testing Effie, trying to trip her up in a lie. "After we play Peeta's interview, I believe the rebels will be anxious for his return. If we can somehow get them to attempt a rescue when they think we'll be vulnerable," he turned to Effie, "you could get word to them. Tell them we were given information that they were holed up in the caves in District Eleven and we are sending in the majority of our tactical units." The bloodcurdling smile that haunted Effie's nightmares flashed before her eyes. "Do you think you can accomplish something so complicated, Miss. Trinket?"

She squared her shoulders, "Of course, sir. I shall go to the watering hole this evening."

"Excellent," Snow looked around the room. "Shall we enjoy the festivities?" He sat on a large comfortable chair and pushed a button on the remote that was always close at hand. "Mr. Mellark," he spoke in a low, controlled voice. "It's time to be of good use."

"There is one thing, sir," Effie took a seat and crossed her ankles. "Portia brought up an excellent point today regarding turning Peeta into a martyr. Though I doubt you causing his death would really have *that* big of an impact on the nation...who cares if...what do they call him again the Jabberjay or is he the Mockingjay?"

"The Jabberjay," one of the officials answered.

"Mmm, yes. The Jabberjay, dies for the sake of his Mockingjay, in this case, Peeta dies for Katniss, we've all seen it before in the arena. But if you'd like to prevent him from perishing before they come for him you may want to feed the prisoners," Effie reached for a cup and poured some tea. "These little cakes are delicious, aren't they?" She spoke to no one in particular. The seed had been planted now it was up to the officials to go with it.

"We could send the boy a plate of food," one of the men said.

Another added, "He won't touch it unless we feed the girl down there too." A slight argument broke out amongst the men regarding whether or not to provide Peeta and Johanna something to eat as Effie nibbled on a small piece of cake and sipped at some tea.

"Enough!" President Snow demanded. "Have that Avox he's so fond of bring two trays of food for them. Nothing too rich, I wouldn't want them to get sick, but let's give them some meat...bread...vegetables...water and then we'll show Mr. Mellark how kind we can really be." Snow grinned.

Effie worried.

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Two trays of food were slid across the concrete floor, one towards Peeta and one towards Johanna.

"Is this real?" Johanna said with a hint of confusion in her voice. "I'm dreaming right?"

Peeta gave his head a little shake. He wasn't quite sure if it was real or not. Lately it was kind of hard to tell with all the drugs they were pumping through his veins. "I...I don't know." He poked a tentative finger at it. "Feels real enough."

He heard the voice again, *"It's real, Peeta. Go ahead and eat it."* He looked around the room for the girl, but she wasn't there, just her voice was.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said.

Peeta was a bit skeptical at first until he picked up a stale roll and bit into it. He closed his eyes and swore he just took a bite out of heaven. It was dry and didn't flake at all, but it was food and ambrosia to his taste buds. "You have to eat it Johanna."

"What if it's poisoned?" She asked, holding up the roll and examining it. "You shouldn't eat it, Peeta."

"It's okay. She said it was." Peeta scooped up some of the peas into his mouth.

"She?" Johanna looked at him and broke off a small piece of roll before putting it into her mouth. "Is *she* here again?"

Peeta shook his head. "No, not here. She just told me to eat."

Johanna scrutinized Peeta carefully and he seemed to be doing okay, besides, if they were going to poison them at least the torture would

be over. With a halfhearted shrug of her shoulder she decided to eat.
"Do you remember her name this time?"

"I forgot to ask, but she never tells me anyway. Always says I'll figure it out on my own." Peeta took a bite of the beef that was sitting on his plate. "This is overcooked and really good."

Johanna let out a laugh and said, "Yeah. Why don't you tell me about her? The girl. What does she look like?"

Peeta sighed. "She's so beautiful. Long dark hair that she wears in a braid over her shoulder, but not always...I think she used to wear it differently and I know she wears it down sometimes," he smiled softly. "It feels nice when she wears it that way...smells good too. Her nose is straight with a little...I don't know how to explain it..." he had a far off look in his eyes as he pictured her, "...I always think of it as perky."

"Probably the only perky thing about her," Johanna mumbled under her breath.

"Then there are the freckles." Peeta lifted his finger and started dabbing in the air. "Twelve of them across the bridge of her nose." She had more than that, but only twelve that others knew about. The rest were a secret, he didn't know how he knew this, but he did and when he pictured the rest of her golden spots he could feel a slight flush rush up his cheeks. "Katniss," he whispered.

"There ya go, cinnamon buns," Johanna bit into her beef with gusto.
"Katniss."

Peeta lifted his eyes to Johanna, they were clear now. "How long did it last this time?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "It's getting pretty hard to tell. You're having regular conversations with me and then you start talking about her like she's a figment of your imagination."

"Johanna, I have to figure out what they're giving me in those tubes that's screwing with my memory," Peeta rubbed at his temple and studied his tray of food. "I know who you are...I sort of know who I am," he glanced out of the cell, "hell, I can even remember Darius, but I struggle to remember Katniss or me and Katniss together. It's like they're trying to erase her from my life," his voice began to shake.

"Good luck with that," Johanna sounded confident. "Peeta there's no way they can accomplish anything like that. It doesn't matter what they do to you. Even if they wiped your memory, the moment you saw her...Trust me, you two wouldn't be apart for long." She stuck her legs out in front of her, shoved some bread in her mouth and started talking with her mouth full. "It makes me sick, but you two are...shit...you're just supposed to be together. I kind of want to puke whenever I think about it."

Peeta let out a chuckle. "Gee, thanks Johanna." He ate a few more bites. "So, why do you think they're feeding us?"

"Oh, I know why they're feeding *me*," she answered.

"Why's that?" He asked.

"Cause you won't eat unless I do. So the question is, why are they feeding *you*?" Johanna lifted her right brow into her hairline. "They've got something planned for you Peeta. Kind of makes me wonder what it is."

"Yeah," he pushed some peas around the plate and thought about not eating. "She's talking to me again." He could hear Katniss' voice.

"What's she saying?" Johanna asked.

"Eat, Peeta. You need your strength." Peeta's worried expression creased his face.

"There's one thing I've got to say about fireball, she was pretty smart when it came to survival. I'd listen to her if I were you." Johanna watched as Peeta's features softened and his eyes glassed over. "She hasn't steered you wrong yet, Peeta."

"Who hasn't?" He asked as he lifted a few peas to his mouth.

"Fireball," Johanna said. "Your wife...mother of your child..."

"Yeah, I know. I know. Pain in your ass." Peeta had heard Johanna call fireball that many times, but she never called her by her real name. Johanna always told him that he had to remember her name on his own. It was important for him to figure out who she was by himself, but it was hard for Peeta to think of this fireball person when all he could see was the girl with the silver eyes and the freckles. Peeta ate his food like the girl told him to. Drank all of his water and when he was through he let her run her fingers through his hair...brush her lips against his. He could feel her breath warm against his skin, smell the sweet spring scent of lavender in her soft brown hair. Tonight he could see her walking across a bedroom, wearing an oversized shirt, her long braid was coming out of its weave, her eyes held his gaze. He needed to figure out where they were. And what was her name?

"What are you looking at?" She asked as she slowly made her way towards him.

It amazed him how she never made a sound when she walked. "I'm looking at the truest form of beauty ever created." The blush that crept

up her cheeks was quite becoming. "Can I take your hair out of the braid?"

"Would you like to?" She stopped walking and stood next to a wrought iron chair with a plush velvet cushion.

Peeta eased off of the large bed, he could feel the soft quilted material beneath him, and made his way over to her. "Sit down." She sat on the chair and followed his every movement, her eyes holding his racing heart captive until he stood directly in front of her and took the band out of her hair. That's when she closed her eyes and lifted her hands to his waist. "Katniss," he said softly as he threaded his fingers through her hair, watching the brown waves cascade down her shoulders. "Katniss," he captured her face in his hands and lifted her lips to his. "I've missed you."

"I'm right here, Peeta. I've always been here," she breathed against his mouth. "Always." Her arms wrapped around his neck, her fingers laced through his hair as he lifted her in his arms.

Peeta could feel the love they shared flowing between them. "Please don't let them take you from me."

"They won't as long as you hold on to this. Just hold on to moments like this, Peeta. Times like this that they can't touch. That belonged to you and me." Katniss cradled his cheek in the palm of her hand. "I love you, Peeta. No matter what they say...no matter what they tell you, it was always you."

He felt the strong hands gripping his arms, ripping him away from her. "No! Katniss! Katniss!" He was being dragged down the familiar hallway, the one that led to the room with the tubes that took bits of her away. "KATNISS!"

"Yes, Katniss," President Snow fiddled with a fresh rose in his lapel. "Say her name as much as you like, Peeta. She *is* the reason you're here."

"You," Peeta growled. "It doesn't matter what you do, I won't forget her."

"Oh, Peeta. I don't want you to forget her. I want you to see her for who she really is." President Snow motioned to the guards and Peeta was strapped down to a table. His legs belted at the ankles, calves and thighs. A thick leather strap across his waist and his arms out to the side, bound so tightly they couldn't move. A one by one inch device was placed on his arm and two tubes shot out, burying themselves deep into Peeta's skin. "There we are," Snow leered. "Just relax and let the venom sooth you."

Peeta could feel his head start to pound, his skin was beginning to burn as everything around him started to take on a strange glow. "No," he tried to fight...to move his legs, but they were frozen in place. "Please don't." Begging was useless. It was time for his daily reeducation.

"Today we're going to learn something new about the woman you claimed to have married. Who said, she's having your child." Snow walked around the room at a snail's pace before turning on the large overhead television screen. "Do you have any clue who that is, Peeta?"

"Ga...Gale," he answered. "Katniss' cousin. My friend."

"Your friend," Snow let out a laugh. "Would you like to see what your friend and your, so called wife, do behind your back?" There was no need to wait for an answer. Recordings of Gale and Katniss in the woods sharing a picnic, Gale sketching something while Katniss ate

chocolate cake. Then Gale moved closer to her and spoke to her about a kiss Katniss had shared with Peeta.

"So how's Peeta?" Gale asked Katniss.

"Um...fine."

"Has he...Has he said anything to you...about us?"

"Not really." Katniss put the empty cake box down and placed the fork and napkin inside of it. "I've talked to him about the arena though."

"What did you tell him?" Gale scooted closer to her.

"The truth." Katniss looked down at her lap and folded her hands in it. "He asked me if we were faking it in the arena after he..."

"After he, what?" Gale asked.

"He kissed me."

"I figured he'd try something since we're not exactly a couple anymore."

"You figured?" Katniss turned to him. "Why would you think he'd try something with me?"

"The same reason I gave you months ago, Katniss. He has feelings for you." Gale cleared his throat and asked. "What did you do when he kissed you?"

"I kissed him back."

"What kind of kiss was it?" Gale asked.

"Huh?"

He looked directly at her and moved closer to her. "What kind of kiss was it? Was it a friendly kiss or something...more?"

"I don't think we should be talking about this."

"Why not? We're friends, right?" Gale asked innocently.

"I suppose, but..."

"But?" Gale turned himself until he faced her straight on. "Are you afraid I might get jealous?"

"Yes."

"I'm not jealous, Katniss. I have no reason to be."

"You always got jealous of Peeta before. Why aren't you now?"

"We're not romantically involved anymore so..." Gale shrugged, as he leaned closer into her. "Besides, I know you don't have those types of feelings for Peeta."

"It was a...something more kiss." Her eyes were glistening as she said, "He held my face in his hands and..."

"Like this?" Gale cupped her cheeks and lowered his voice down. "Is this how he held you?" He was whispering now.

"Yes," she whispered back.

"Then what did he do?" The tip of Gale's nose was touching hers.

"He kissed me." Katniss closed her eyes.

"Like this?" He leaned in and placed a very soft peck on her lips. "Or like this?" You could see tip of Gale's tongue flick against her bottom

lip. Then Katniss parted her lips and Gale kissed her in a very intimate manner. When he pulled away, she kept her eyes closed and ran her tongue over her mouth. "So?"

"So what?" She asked in a dreamlike voice.

"Is that how he kissed you?"

She shook her head slowly from left to right and said, "No." She opened her eyes. "It was more like the first one." She swallowed and said, "I pushed him away though."

Gale rubbed his nose against hers and asked, "Why?"

"Because..." Katniss lifted her hands to his head and threaded her fingers through his hair. "It didn't feel right. His lips...his hair..."

"What was wrong?" He breathed against her lips.

"It wasn't you," she whispered to him as she closed her eyes and Gale's lips met hers in another kiss.

The whole scene President Snow played for him on the television screen seemed familiar to Peeta. Like he had seen it before. No, not seen it...been a part of it...but when Peeta tried to remember it everything seemed hazy. Sort of like a dream. "That's not right. It wasn't Gale that kissed her. I kissed her in the woods. It was me." At least he thought it was him.

"Yes, you did kiss her in the woods. We have that footage as well, but it was nothing as...intimate as what you just viewed." Snow looked at the confused expression that had crossed Peeta's face. "Cameras don't lie, Peeta." He gave a signal to someone and another recording started.

Peeta watched as the next scene was him kissing Katniss in the woods next to the fence. It was just a soft peck on the lips. She barely responded to him, but when she did and she lifted her fingers to his hair she pushed him away and started to cry...ran into the woods. "No," he said softly. "No. I don't believe you. You're making this up." But how could he have made this up. Peeta was watching it with his own eyes. He spent two hours watching and re-watching the same recordings of Katniss and Gale starting up a relationship behind his back. Gale seducing Katniss against a tree...in the wee hours of the morning before Peeta met up with her, carrying his hunting gear. Did he hunt? He wondered. For some reason he didn't think he did. There were so many things that were off as well as accurate about the recordings. Over and over again he saw her...Katniss...his wife...the mother of his baby, or was it his?

"They tried to stay away from one another, but it was useless." Snow walked up to Peeta, leaned his head close to his ear and whispered, "How sure are you that the child she's carrying is actually yours? Didn't you wonder why she never told you about it?"

Peeta's eyes flew wide open, his heart began to race, his teeth clenched together. Snow had just confirmed his suspicions. "You bitch! You two timing bitch!"

Snow stood upright and lifted his chin to the physician. "That's enough for today. Miss. Trinket will be here to escort him down to his cell." President Snow adjusted his suit coat, pat at the corners of his puffy lips with his handkerchief and said, "Till tomorrow, Peeta." As he left the room he passed by Effie who was waiting in the hall. "How did it go?"

"The message was delivered sir. If it does reach its destination then the rebels will be here in five days," Effie said proudly.

"Excellent work, Miss. Trinket. Please make sure you try to find out as much as you can while the young man is in his weakened state," Snow stole a glance at Peeta then resumed his walk towards his office surrounded by his guards.

"Time to head back, Peeta." Effie knew what they were doing to him today. She had been in the control room when they were altering the video feeds of Katniss and Peeta. Superimposing Gale's features on top of Peeta's, altering the vocals, changing certain aspects of the conversation to make it appear as though it were Katniss and Gale talking and not Katniss and Peeta. However, there were some things that simply couldn't be changed. You couldn't take away the fact that Peeta had been sketching or Katniss had been eating the cake that he had baked her. These were the little things that Peeta could not overlook while watching the recordings. "Place him in the elevator. I shall ride down with him," Effie ordered the guards. The instant the door was closed she opened her purse and pulled out a tube of lipstick which hid the vial of medication that would drop Peeta's body temperature. "Oh my darling boy, you must hang on."

"She's a two timing whore!" Peeta began to tremble as his body went from burning hot to cold.

"No, darling. No. Remember what I told you. They are showing you lies. I was there when they altered the recordings. Katniss has always remained faithful to you." She forced Peeta to look into her eyes. "Who loves you, Peeta? Who!"

He grit his teeth. He knew what Effie wanted him to say, but he couldn't do it. Not after what he had just seen. "She doesn't, Effie. She loves Gale."

"She does not. Now say it! Who loves you?"

"Kat...Katniss," He practically cried when her name spilled out from between his lips and he knew in his heart it was the truth. "She loves me. She does."

"Yes, dear. She adores you." Effie stroked his head. "Now, who can you trust?" Her voice was much more tender this time.

"Katniss," Peeta closed his eyes and reminded himself that his girl, his feisty girl had always protected him, always been there for him. "I trust Katniss." His body temperature was starting to return to normal. "Why do I get so hot afterward?"

"It's the tracker jacker venom, but don't you worry, I've found out some very interesting things about it. It's not as fool proof as the Capitol seems to think it is." Effie held onto his arm and ran her hand over the spot where the tubes had been. "Tomorrow when you go in you must still act as though you hate Katniss. Do not let them know you remember you love her or they'll fill you with even more of that vile poison than they already do."

Peeta nodded. "I forget sometimes Effie...forget about her...about the way we were together."

"Then ask Johanna to tell you about her the moment you step into that cell. You tell her to remind you each and every second of the day you're together, do you understand me?" Effie gave his hand a little squeeze and whispered in his ear. "They're going to come and rescue us soon, Peeta and it will all be over. Now you act like you hate Katniss and every time you say the words, 'I hate Katniss' you'll really be saying, I love her."

Peeta tried to give Effie a little grin, but he felt too weak and mentally drained. "I hate her with all my heart and soul."

"That's my boy," Effie stood tall and quickly asked. "I shall tell them you were ranting about hating Katniss so much that I couldn't get any information out of you regarding the rebellion."

"Sounds good to me," Peeta lifted his eyes to the lights on the elevator. "I better start screaming now."

His exit from the tiny elevator went off without a hitch and when he entered his cell he waited until the guards were out of earshot before asking Johanna about Katniss. "It's fading away, Johanna and I need to know the truth, but..." he looked around, "...they won't like it, will they? If you tell me about her?"

"What if I tell you a different story?" Johanna lifted the corner of her mouth in a little smirk. "The story of Princess Fireball and Prince Cinnamon Buns and how they were trapped inside of a...evil fortress and had to battle other princes and princesses to survive?"

"How will that help?" Peeta looked confused.

Johanna gave him a little smile, "Trust me, it will. Come on," she pat the ground through the bars and said, "Take a seat. It's a long story. Starts off with a couple of kids, a girl. We're gonna call her Fireball. She was from the wrong side of the tracks and wasn't all that much to look at. Then there was a boy, Cinnamon Buns, he was from a better area than she was and he could do a hell of a lot better than her, but for some strange reason, Buns, I'm just gonna call the guy Buns, had the hots for Fireball."

"Was she nice?"

"Hell no," Johanna made a face. "Girl had a wicked temper, but she had morals, kind of a hard thing to hold onto in their world, she could out shoot any man plus she was fearless."

"Sounds like the kind of girl I'd like to know," Peeta sat back against the wall and let Johanna tell him a story. "Hey Johanna," he whispered. "Do you see her?"

"Who?" Johanna stopped talking, turned to see what Peeta was looking at, expecting to see nothing...sure he was going to start talking about the girl again, but she had no such luck. "Annie?"

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Effie checked her appearance for the third time in the mirror prior to leaving. "Miss. Trinket," her new personal security guard was waiting for her. "Anytime you're ready to leave, I'll be in the hall."

"Thank you." One more check in the mirror and she was off. She held onto her purse which carried the message she had written out earlier in the day. It was a detailed message informing the rebels that the Capitol would be sending their forces to the caves located in District Eleven, to search for the refugees from the arena in five days time so security would be at a minimum around the prisoners. This was the lie that President Snow came up with. However, embedded within that message Effie used a basic code, one that she and Peeta had frequently used in which every tenth word was used to reveal a secret message. She had to let the rebels know that the note she was sending to them was a lie and that there was a traitor in the rebellion. Of course, Effie had to condense the lettering, but she was certain her

use of the code would be clear to those close to her, and to those that didn't know her, it would be overlooked. Peeta had told her the rebels rarely used the code, but it was the only one Haymitch had committed to memory so Effie made it a point to memorize it as well. Her new security officer, assigned to her that morning by the president, would escort her a block away from the bar she was to go to, a hole in the wall establishment by Capitol standards, but quite a popular night spot for morphling addicts and drunken citizens. When Portia had mentioned a bar Effie had expected it to be Carter's establishment, The Library, but the address Portia had written out for her in lipstick was on the opposite side of the city. Effie walked into the noisy club, expecting it to house a handful of derelicts and drunkards, only to find it was wall to wall people, dancing, drinking. Many were half dressed, practically pawing at one another on the dance floor, and she was suddenly glad she had listened to Portia and dressed down for the evening, wearing a long red wig, black and red suit. She still looked like herself, just a more muted version of herself.

She walked up to the bar and searched out the barmaid, an orange skinned girl walked up to her and slapped a napkin down in front of her. "What can I get for you?"

"I'd like a phone to drink and use of your Mustang Blue...I mean...I'd like a Mustang Blue to drink and use of your phone. I must send a message to my sister who is looking for me." Effie said nervously. She had flubbed the first part of the code and hoped this girl was the right one. She was the only colored girl working in the place.

The girl eyed her up and down, turned around, began mixing a concoction of alcohol then slapped a napkin down in front of Effie. "That'll be four hundred dollars." The instructions were simple, put the note under the money, drink half the drink, finish up with the rest of the code words then leave the counter. Effie slapped a thousand dollar bill

on the counter with the note beneath, the image of Snow's predecessor stared up at her from the bright blue and red bill. She lifted the straw to her lips, drank the overly sweet and powerful cocktail halfway through then said, "Never mind about the phone. There's my sister now."

Effie stood up, keeping her eye on the colored girl behind the bar as she made her way through the crowd. Portia had told her to stop in the restroom if she didn't feel comfortable with mingling for a few minutes, which is what Effie did. It would look suspicious if she walked into a bar and out of it in less than a minute. She walked into a private ladies room suite and blew out a breath thinking, 'I cannot keep this up much longer. I'm going to get either myself or someone else killed.'

"Effie?"

Her head snapped to the right of the restroom's exit. "Carter?"

The sound of his laughter soothed her worried soul. "You frightened lanthe." He held his hand out to her and led her down the hall to a dark and quiet area marked SERVANTS ONLY. "She thought you were a spy sent in from the Capitol."

"What is this place?" Effie looked around.

"My office...for now anyway. I'm sort of moving things around since we're doing so well. Getting ready for the next phase of things." Carter looked her up and down. "New costume? Not as good as the last one."

"No," Effie automatically touched the red wig. "Portia suggested I dress down and told me to come here and send a message to...some friends, but..." she stopped herself before telling him about the traitor. For all she knew, Carter could be the traitor.

"But?" He asked.

"Peeta...he needs help. They mustn't wait much longer." Effie was so confused as to whether or not to trust him. If he was the traitor, wouldn't he have told the president about her being a member of the rebellion? "I can't stay, Carter and I must ask...now that I'm working with Snow...Please..."

"You were never here, Effie. I don't even think lanthe recognized you. If she asks..."

"Which one was she? I don't think I've ever met your lanthe." Effie gave him a grin.

"She made your drink." Carter walked Effie to the exit. "I try to keep her out of this...all she does is pretty much open and close the doors for people...takes messages and gives them to me... The mere thought of Snow turning her into an Avox turns my stomach to knots."

"Like Justus and Regina," she said without thinking.

"Justus and Regina?" Carter asked. "You mean it's true? The Avox you brought that night...it was him?"

She could've kicked herself for saying something, but now that she did there was no going back. "I didn't find out about them until they were just about to board the hovercraft, but yes."

"Effie." Carter's face was plagued with fear. "If I had known who they were, I would've made sure you got on that hovercraft with the rest of them that night. Do you have any idea what Snow will do to you if he finds out that you're responsible for the escape of the first Capitol rebel?"

"What about you, Carter? Aren't you worried?" She asked with an inquisitive brow.

"Absolutely. I'm trying to convince Ianthe that we need to leave this place as well, but her family's here and trying to get all of them rescued...they're all servants so..." There was a long drawn out pause. "Guess you better head out before Snow wonders what took you so long in my establishment."

"How many establishments do you own, Carter?" Effie asked.

"I'm not quite sure," he thought for a moment then said, "I believe I own seven public consumption institutions, I know I have three private...a few investments..."

"I was speaking about bars, Carter," Effie flustered a bit. "Surely you didn't think I was looking for a rundown on your personal or professional portfolio?"

He gave her a little laugh, "I suppose I'm still a Capitol sponsor in my blood. It's very difficult to quit behaving a particular way when you've become accustomed to it."

'Yes,' Effie thought to herself, 'like flaunt your worth in the middle of a war.' "I must go. My security officer is waiting for my return." She headed out of the darkened area, "Farewell, Carter."

As Effie exited the crowded club she saw several familiar faces in the room, two other escorts and plenty of sponsors. She needed to leave before someone recognized her too. Hightailing it out of the building and down the street she took notice of the Capitol and how unaffected it was compared to the rest of the nation. There was fighting going on all over their country. People were dying at that very minute and none of these people cared about it. If they even knew about it. Effie

couldn't help but wonder how news of the war hadn't put a damper on their festivities? Since the end of the Games, President Snow had been trying to turn the people of the country, especially those of the Capitol, against Katniss and Peeta by airing continual news coverage of the war. Yet these people had ceased to stop dancing, drinking...engaging in promiscuous public behavior and she couldn't understand why. 'Would they ever?' She asked herself. 'Probably not,' she answered as she walked up to her personal security guard.

"Ma'am," he greeted her and took up a steady stride next to hers. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine..." it dawned on Effie that she didn't know what to call the man. She turned to him, took in his features, he was easily over six foot tall, broad shouldered, muscular, dark skinned, close cropped hair, wide, flat nose and large lips. "What is your name?"

"Tanner," he answered in a deep, booming voice.

"Tanner what?" She asked.

"Pardon me?" The Peacekeeper looked confused.

"What is your last name Tanner?" Effie asked him. "You do have one, don't you?"

"Tanner is my last name."

"Then what is your first name?" Effie blew out a breath.

"Steven. Steven Tanner, ma'am." He ushered her to a small vehicle and held the passenger door opened for her.

'Great,' Effie thought to herself, 'just what I needed, a Peacekeeper with two first names constantly at my side.' She adjusted herself in the

seat of the car and looked out the window, black preventing anyone from looking in, but allowing her to see everything around her. "Mr. Tanner," if you wouldn't mind taking me to the Tribute Center, I'd like to change before meeting with the president."

"Yes, ma'am." The guard answered as he started the vehicle and drove towards their destination.

Effie cleared her throat. "Once I am through with my meetings I will no longer need your services for the evening."

The guard glanced over his shoulder at her then back at the road, "Pardon me, ma'am?"

"You're excused for the day when I'm through with my duties with President Snow," Effie thought she was clear the first time she had said it.

"I'm sorry, Miss. Trinket, but I'm your personal security agent," he informed her.

"Yes, I was told that this morning," she fiddled with her purse.

"Ma'am, I am at your service twenty-four hours a day seven days a week."

Effie's head snapped to attention. "Do you mean you're not allowed to leave my side?"

"As of this morning it is my sworn duty to protect you at all cost," he said it as though taking an oath. "I will sacrifice my life for the safety of Effie Trinket, to ensure her well being, to protect and serve Miss. Trinket as she works to bring justice..."

"Enough!" Effie barked. "Please," she softened her voice and tried to comprehend what the young man was telling her. "Mr. Tanner," she swallowed, "Am I to understand that you are similar to the guards the president of our country has protecting him?"

"Not similar Miss. Trinket. Exactly like them except my station is with you."

She had never considered this. Surveillance, yes...she could get around that, but an actual security agent... "And you do not get a day...any time off?" Effie asked.

"I will be allowed two three and a half hour breaks each day to sleep." He turned into a private parking facility, pulled into a cargo elevator and pressed several buttons on the vehicle's dashboard. "My belongings have been transferred to your quarters after I was sworn in this morning."

Effie tried not to fret. What was she to do now? "Well, I do hope you're tidy, and that you're polite to Miss. Cresta. I shall introduce you to her when we arrive. She fears Peacekeepers so I would appreciate it if you wouldn't wear your helmet while we're in our quarters. It is of the utmost importance to the president that we remain on excellent terms with our victors from Districts Two and Four." She couldn't make it appear as though Annie was getting special treatment.

"Miss. Trinket?"

"Yes, Mr. Tanner," she answered.

"Hasn't anyone informed you that the victor from District Four has been removed from your residency?"

Effie's fingers flew to her throat. "Pardon me?"

"As a matter of fact, ma'am. I was informed that you were being reassigned quarters adjacent to the President's rose garden."

The walls of the vehicle began to close in on Effie. She ran her hand over her torso and felt the bump within her corset that housed the computer. She had yet to take the corset off since the beginning of the war with the exception of bathing and it was cutting off the circulation to her midriff. Now it seemed to be squeezing all of the air out of her lungs. Effie stepped out of the car door that her guard held open for her and looked around at her surroundings. 'Haymitch,' her mind was in desperate need of the man's protection, but Haymitch Abernathy wasn't there to keep her safe. Steve Tanner, Peacekeeper from District Two was now the man in charge of her safety. Effie Trinket glanced at the man who checked the hallways prior to her walking down them and wondered how loyal would he be to the oath he took when she was the one trying to kill him.

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The dining hall's scent hit Katniss about a mile away, at least it felt that way to her. Fortunately the doctor's treatment for morning sickness was still working, but once they ran out of medication, she had no clue how she was going to avoid throwing up before every meal. Dr. Valero had told her many women stopped experiencing those symptoms once they reached their second trimester of pregnancy and by Katniss' calculations that was only a couple of weeks away. She

seriously hoped that was one of the symptoms that went away, but the doctor also told her that others took its place and then there was the one thing Katniss couldn't avoid...showing. Each day she examined her body, looking for signs of change. Peeta had told her she didn't notice a thing when she first got pregnant, and Katniss had to admit, he was right. Now she noticed everything. The vitamin regimen the doctor had her on left her skin glowing, her hair was shinier and growing at a ridiculous rate as were the nails she bit every single day. Her breasts were still getting larger, she honestly didn't know how, but they were. Her hips were getting a bit wider which balanced out the whole boob thing so she didn't feel so self conscience. From anyone's perspective, she just looked like a girl turning into a woman. The weirdest thing was the line...a strange line was starting to form from her navel down to the top of her pubic bone. She'd have to remember to ask Regina about that the next time she saw her.

As Katniss, her family and Gale met up with the rest of the Hawthorne clan, she saw the expressions on their faces...pity. It was the same look everyone in the district gave her. Some faces had sorrow, some even had guilt, though Katniss had no clue why, but there was always pity. Katniss was the girl everyone felt sorry for right now. She wasn't sure how long that would last before they all started looking at her expectantly. Eventually they'd all wonder why she wasn't acting like the savior the rebels had made her out to be while she was in the arena, but for right now, she could simply be the woman that had fought and killed to save the life of her husband only to have him literally slip out of the safe hands of the rebel's rescue mission, and then there was the baby. Katniss pushed that thought from her mind. She hated what she was doing to these people. The lies she had to tell them...that she was being forced to tell them.

"Hi, Katniss," Posy's greeting was genuine as was her smile. "Can I sit next to you tonight?"

"I'm sitting next to her, rosy Posy," Gale lifted his sister up.

Katniss gave Posy a little tickle and said, "Aw, I think you'll survive not sitting next to me tonight, Gale. Why not let Posy have the honor?"

Prim took Katniss' hand and said, "As long as I get the other side," and smiled.

"Looks like I'll be surrounded by beautiful girls," Katniss grinned.

Bing held the door open for them to walk through. "Don't know about you, Gale, but I think I'm jealous."

"Yeah," Gale gave him a halfhearted smile.

"If it makes you feel better, you can sit next to me." Evelyn walked in and looked up at Gale. "I'd be happy to have a handsome young man such as yourself dining next to me."

"There you go, Catnip." Gale grinned. "Your mom's my dinner date tonight."

Katniss whipped her head in his direction and snapped, "I don't date! I'm married!"

"Hey...I didn't mean..." Gale tried to explain, but it was too late. Katniss was already dragging Prim and Posy up the line towards the trays to get their food.

The comment was innocent enough, but it bothered her to no end. It seemed like every time Katniss turned around Gale was there offering to do things for her, help her carry her food tray, like she couldn't lift it herself...walk her to the doctor's office, or to the education classes which Katniss never attended anyway. She hated it.

"He didn't mean anything by that," Prim said quietly as she got her tray of food.

Katniss gave a quick peek at Posy who was standing on the opposite side of her and said to Prim, "I know. Drop it, Prim." The last thing she needed was to explain herself to her little sister when she couldn't even explain it to herself.

Posy was full of conversation and childish fun, making Katniss smile yet long for Peeta even more. Yearning for him to sit next to her, hold her hand and marvel at the wonders of life through a child's eye. Posy liked District Thirteen. There was always food to eat and clothes to wear. Her mother didn't have to work all the time and her brothers seemed happy. When talk turned to Buttercup's arrival, Prim worried about what to feed him. Sneaking food out of the dining hall was punishable, strictly forbidden.

"Don't worry, Prim," Katniss gave her sister's hand a little pat, "I'll figure out something." She hated the wretched cat, but her sister adored it and it brought her so much joy. It was easy enough sneaking bits of her food into a napkin and hiding it inside of Peeta's sweatshirt. Katniss just hoped she didn't get caught, but if she did, she'd just say she was bringing it to Peeta and play the mentally disorientated card she had been dealt.

She could feel Gale's breath on her shoulder before he even spoke. Katniss wasn't thrilled about leaving with him, but she stood up, scraped up the last remaining bits of food off of her tray and said farewell to those at the table. "Let's go," she said with a stone face before leaving the dining hall with Gale and heading towards the meeting room they had been called to via Gale's communicuff. As she walked down the hall she kept telling herself to be nicer to him. That he wasn't trying to take Peeta's place, but she was just so damn angry

with her situation and Gale was just so damn easy to take it out on. "How do I stop this?" She asked Peeta as she walked. "If you were here things would be different. You two would probably be teasing me about who got to sit next to me at dinner. Hell, you'd probably tell me to sit next to Gale and then play with my foot under the table or something. God, Peeta, I miss you. Are you still alive? You are, aren't you? We haven't heard anything about you from the Capitol. No one's heard a thing from that area. Haymitch is worried sick. He thinks you're all dead, but won't come right out and say it. Finnick just *wishes* you were all dead."

"Catnip?" Gale's questionable expression told Katniss she was moving her lips again.

"What?"

"You okay?" He asked.

Katniss let out a huge sigh, "I was going to be until my conversation got interrupted."

"Who...um..." Gale looked around, "Who you talking to?"

"Peeta," Katniss answered as if it weren't obvious then moved her lips, "You think he'd know that by now."

"Does...um...does Peeta talk back to you?" Gale rubbed a finger under his nose.

Katniss rolled her eyes at him and said, "Look around, Gale. Do you see him? Of course he doesn't talk back to me. What am I, crazy or something? It's not like I'm hearing voices or anything." She shook her head and started talking to Peeta again. "These people think I'm

insane. It's not like I'm doing anything wrong. All I'm doing is talking to you."

"You've got food hiding up your sleeve, Katniss," Peeta's voice in her head quietly reminded her about the stash she had for Buttercup.

'Guess I am hearing voices,' she laughed to herself. "I need to stop by my quarters for a second. It'll only take a minute," Katniss couldn't go into a meeting with stolen food. That would be a huge mistake.

"We don't have time," Gale told her. "We've got to get to the meeting room. My instructions were to bring you there without delay."

"Since when do you follow the rules?" She said with a hint of disgust.

"Since my family and I were provided with three square meals a day and a roof over our heads. Since I don't have to worry about my little brothers and sister being reaped. Since..."

Katniss held up her hand, "Yeah...okay... I get it. You're all, soldier Gale Hawthorne now." She hoped *he* wouldn't bust her for the stolen food.

He let out a little laugh, "Yeah...maybe a little, but...I'm still Gale." He paused and looked at her. "I can still be your friend, Catnip...if you'll let me be."

She studied his boyish features, the gray eyes much like her own, chiseled chin, full lips, straight black hair... she had kissed those lips, run her fingers through that hair and told him she loved him thinking he was Peeta only a short time ago. It took her awhile to realize what she had done, but when he asked her a few days afterward if she remembered that morning and what she had said to him she told him, "no." Poor Gale looked like someone had run over his puppy after that

so Katniss thought back to that morning and then it hit her. She thought Peeta was there with her. She was sure of it. She felt him holding her...felt his arms...his kiss, but it didn't feel right. Though Katniss still saw Peeta when she remembered the kiss, in her heart she knew it was Gale on the other end of her lips. "Come on. We don't want to be late." She turned and walked toward the meeting room where everyone who was anyone in the rebellion sat or stood around a large table and stared at a giant television screen.

"Have we heard what they're going to be showing yet?" Gale asked.

"Not yet, but we have an idea," Haymitch motioned for a chair. "Why don't you sit down sweetheart?"

Katniss saw Justus standing fairly close to Haymitch and thought, 'If Haymitch is being nice to me, something is about to go wrong and if something's going to go wrong, I need to be close to Justus so he can take care of me and the baby.' "Okay," Katniss walked around the table towards her mentor. Justus pulled out his chair and offered it to Katniss then took up a position behind her. "What's up?" Katniss stole a peek at President Coin, a woman in her fifties with perfectly straight hair that hung straight down like a silver curtain. She had strong, yet attractive features and though her voice was quite feminine, the tone in it always demanded respect.

"We've gotten a message from a source in one of the districts." Haymitch started. "It's about Peeta and the rest of the group."

Katniss sat upright, for the first time noticed Finnick crying to himself at a corner seat and said, "Are they dead?"

"We don't think so sweetheart, but we do think they're..." Haymitch swallowed and ran his hand down his face. "Listen sweetheart...this is war and things happen..."

"For Christ sake, just tell me!" Katniss yelled.

"Katniss," Plutarch began, "From the message we received we are led to believe that the prisoners being held at the Capitol are on the verge of death."

That horrible ice cold feeling ran through her, like her blood turned to arctic water. "And you know this how?" She was surprised at how calm she sounded.

President Coin took up her position at the head of the table. "A rebel on the inside was able to send us some communications."

"However," Plutarch added, "Haymitch seems to be of the mind that there is something off with the message."

"Like what?" Katniss looked to her mentor.

"Don't know, but there's something..." he rubbed at his chin.

"Who did the message come from?" Gale asked.

"We don't know," Coin answered.

"Effie." Haymitch said with certainty.

"Effie!" Katniss was more likely to believe Haymitch over the president. "I...I don't understand. What...why..." She turned to face her former ally who was sniveling and yelled, "Finnick! Knock it off! I can't hear myself think!"

"We should've gone back for them," Finnick stood up, tripping over his chair in the process, "Why didn't we go back?" He crumbled down next to it started his crying again.

Katniss began to rub that spot on her forehead where the pain normally started and thought, 'Good Lord, he's worse than me.' "Finnick," her voice wasn't tender but it was kinder, "you're not helping anyone by sitting there and crying so try and pull yourself together." She turned back to Haymitch. "What makes you so sure it was Effie that sent a message to us?"

"Pull that thing up, Plutarch," Haymitch gave his chin a little nudge towards the former Head Gamemaker. "Take a look at that."

Katniss read the giant note displayed on the television screen and said with a serious look on her face, "That's Effie Trinket all right."

"Hah!" Haymitch clapped his hands together once. "Told ya! Now give it a look sweetheart...what am I missing here?"

"How are you so sure it's Effie?" By the sound of his voice, Gale wasn't convinced.

"Because no one I know other than Effie Trinket uses the word vile in normal conversation," Katniss answered, "Plus...Haymitch is right. There's something off about this thing. No, not off, but..." She pointed to a word and said, "Anybody got a pen and paper?"

"Whatcha thinkin' sweetheart?" Haymitch leaned closer to her.

"I'm not sure, but...I'll figure it out. Let me just copy this down."

"I'd be more than happy to print up a copy for you," Plutarch offered.

Katniss shook her head, "No. I need to write it down." Whenever Peeta tried to teach her about the different codes that the rebels used he would send her some sort of love note written amongst a regular one, but Katniss could never figure it out unless she wrote it all down.

That's when she decided he was the codebreaker in the house, not her. If it were left up to her, the Capitol would find scrap papers everywhere telling them everything they needed to know about the rebel's plans and the war would be over within seventy-two hours.

As she finished writing the last of it the seal of Panem filled the television screen and Caesar Flickerman's face appeared. The camera panned out and his guest slowly came into view. For the first time since leaving the arena Katniss felt like she could take a deep breath again. She stood up, walked towards his image and whispered his name like a prayer, "Peeta."

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Watching Katniss storm off after making the comment about her mother being his date really bothered Gale. It seemed like the most innocent of comments sent her into a tailspin lately.

"Give her time, Gale," Bing said quietly. "She's trying to heal."

Gale hung his head slightly down and said, "She blames me for it, doesn't she? For losing the baby?"

"No," Bing gave him a rap between the shoulder blades. "She knows where the blame lies, but she's just lost her child and the father of her baby..." he cleared his throat, "...we don't know if Peeta's dead or

alive. All she's got is hope and if you're there trying to step in and take his place..."

"But I'm not trying to take his place," Gale picked up a tray, saying it quietly, yet urgently. "I'm just doing what Peeta asked me to do. He wanted me to take care of her...to be there for her. That's all I'm trying to do."

"Right now, she doesn't see it that way." Bing lifted up his tray. "All she sees is a young man that had feelings for her trying to fill her missing husband's shoes."

Gale placed his tray on the mechanical belt and stuck his right arm under an electronic scanner so he could be identified. His name, age, weight, height and nutritional needs were spoken out loud in a computer generated voice before food was automatically dispensed into serving bowls and placed on his tray. He gave Katniss a little look before saying to her father in law, "Peeta's shoes are too big for anyone to fill." Gale had finally come to that realization when he had seen everything the guy had done for the people of District Twelve. "I still don't understand why they didn't run. Did he ever tell you?" Gale asked.

"Nope. All I know is that one morning Katniss came into the bakery before it was even open, said Peeta was going to stop by later on in the day, but she didn't want him to have to tell me..." Bing watched as a portion of turnips was dumped into a bowl and placed on his tray. "She took me for a walk and said, 'Pops, Peeta and I are going to be leaving for the Games soon.' I just figured she was saying it out loud in case the Capitol was listening or something, but then she held my hand and squeezed it real tight and said, 'We're going to the Quell, Pops.'" Bing saw the bread they put on the tray and missed his sons terribly. "That's when I knew she meant it. They were going into the

arena...Peeta was..." Bing took a deep breath and blew it out through his nose. "Well..."

"Yeah," Gale swallowed knowing that their decision meant Peeta was going to die. "Like I said, your son's shoes are way too big for *anyone* to fill." He carried his tray to the long table that held the rest of their families and noticed the enormous amount of food piled on Katniss' tray. "You think she's still got something wrong with her? Blood loss or something?"

"What makes you ask that?" Bing looked down at Katniss then back at Gale.

"Don't know...it's just...her nutritional needs seem to be twice as much as yours and mine."

Bing nodded and guessed, "She did have a lot of blood loss from those wounds. Add onto that the miscarriage..."

"Yeah," Gale felt horrible about that. Maybe Katniss didn't blame him, but he blamed himself for it. He had no idea that telling her about the destruction of District Twelve could bring on such consequences.

"What was it like down there today?"

Bing didn't need him to expand on the question. "Didn't see much of anything other than the village and that looked untouched except..." he leaned into Gale and whispered, "I could smell something strange when I walked into the living room to get the book on plants. It made me sneeze."

"Yeah, I heard you," Gale leaned over the table towards Bing. "But then you put yourself on mute."

"Didn't want to keep sneezing into the headset or have Katniss hear me swear." His eyes kept glancing down towards his girls. "Someone was in their house," Bing told Gale. "Don't know who, but I have a feeling they were trying to leave Katniss a message."

Gale's brow furrowed. "How do you know?"

"I'm allergic to roses. They bug the hell out of me...can't stop sneezing. So when I got to the living room and smelled it...Evelyn knows I'm allergic, she's the one that told me so when I was just a kid. Gave me something for it too. She'd never have them in her house as long as she knew I was coming around and I was there everyday before those bombs hit. I walked towards the scent and there it was...sitting on the desk in the study...a perfect white rose in a crystal vase stinking up the whole place."

"You don't suppose Peeta could've left it for Katniss, do you?" Gale asked.

Bing shook his head. "Nope. My boy can't stand the smell of roses and neither can she. He told me so. Never told me why though."

"What'd you do with it?"

"Put it in the fireplace and burned it." Bing told Gale. "Thing is, I smelled the same thing when I went to Katniss and Peeta's house too. Whoever went into her mom's house, went into their house too...covering their bases in case she showed up at either one of the places."

"We should tell Haymitch. He'd probably know if it came from the Capitol," Gale suggested.

Bing sat back and said, "Well, I thought of that, but then I realized my daughter in law has been kept in the dark for far too long, so I thought I'd give her a few hours and tell her myself...maybe you and I can talk to her together? She might want to talk things through with a couple of friends."

Gale grinned. "Think she'll look at it that way?"

"We can hope, but I can't make any..."

The loud beeping noise coming from the band on Gale's wrist interrupted their conversation. "Excuse me." Gale read the communicuff the president of Thirteen had issued him asking him and Katniss to report to their meeting room immediately. "Sorry, sir. We've got to go." Gale stood up and made his way to the end of the table. "Hey," he leaned over Katniss. "We're being summoned to the meeting room. That television broadcast is going to start and they want us there."

The walk to the room with Katniss was more than interesting considering she talked more to her absentee husband than to Gale who was standing right next to her, and once in the meeting room, questions arose regarding a note sent to the rebels from Effie Trinket and Peeta's well being. However, all of it was put on the back burner the moment the seal of Panem flashed onto the large television screen in the meeting room.

"Welcome back, Peeta," Gale had never seen Caesar look so serious.

Peeta was sitting back with his feet planted firmly on the ground and his hands on his knees. "Bet you never thought you'd see me again."

Gale was torn between watching Katniss' reaction to seeing Peeta and the man himself. He looked pretty good considering he was being

held captive by President Snow and supposed to be on the brink of death, but everyone noticed that Peeta wasn't surrounded by a live audience. In fact, many of the people in the meeting room whispered about it, wondered if it had been a recorded interview or if it was live. An order was sent down to Beetee, one of the victors that had been in the Quell with Katniss, to try and trace the broadcast. Gale had been working with the man daily on weapons and learning quite a bit about technology. He had to admit, the guy was smart. More than smart, he was a genius. As Peeta's interview continued on, people's reactions varied to what he was saying about the war and his views on the fighting going on in their nation. He had come right out and spoke against it. Told Katniss to stop the fighting...asked for a cease fire, but Katniss didn't seem to be fazed by his comments as a matter of fact, right before his image faded she let out a little chuckle and lifted her hand to the screen, mouthed something to it then covered her face with her hands. She turned and ran out of the room only to be stopped by one of the president's soldiers, Boggs. A leader and a very serious man that Gale didn't want to have on his bad side, but when he tried to go after Katniss on Coin's orders, Gale blocked him.

"Leave her alone!"

"Out of the way, Hawthorne!" Boggs attempted to push Gale and caught an elbow in the nose.

"Soldier Hawthorne," President Coin said harshly, "Miss. Everdeen wasn't excused from this room."

Gale wiped at the blood dripping from his nose. "She excused *herself* ma'am and her name is Mellark." He didn't know where the words came from, but he meant them. "Mrs. Peeta Mellark. Now if you wouldn't mind, *I'd* like to be excused so I can attend to my bloody nose."

"Take his communicuff," Coin ordered Boggs who quickly removed it from Gale's arm. "Get out."

"Thanks," Gale entered the hallway and looked both ways wondering where Katniss went. She had been hiding a lot lately. He saw the shadows of someone walking in the storage closet just a few yards away and headed for it. "Hey," he opened up the door and saw her take a step back. "You okay?"

"Yeah," her hands were still covering her face. "I just needed to get out of there."

"Catnip, don't cry," he could see her shoulders shaking. "He's alive. That's a good thing, right?"

Katniss dropped her hands and looked at him. "I'm not crying."

Gale was taken completely by surprise when he saw that she was laughing. Katniss was actually laughing. "Sure, I'm getting pounced on by the Peacekeepers of Thirteen and you're in here having the time of your life."

"Huh?" She finally looked at him. "Oh my God. What happened to you?" She lifted up her sleeve then thought better of it and took the oversized sweatshirt off and used the uniform issued to her from District Thirteen to clean his nose instead.

"Ouch. You're hurting me," Gale complained.

"Quit whining. I'm trying to help."

"You couldn't use the soft shirt? You had to use this...cardboard thing instead?" Gale pushed her hand away. "Seriously. I'm fine."

"That's Peeta's." Katniss said sheepishly. "I didn't want to ruin it." She bent down and picked up something that fell out of the shirt. "Food for Buttercup," she said before tucking it between the folds of the sweatshirt. "So, what happened in there?"

"Boggs elbow got in the way of my nose," Gale shrugged. "Guess they didn't like the fact that you left without being dismissed."

Katniss rolled her eyes. "I'm surprised you didn't get sent to the brig as punishment."

Gale lifted his arm and said, "No, they took my bracelet instead."

"Want mine?" She lifted her arm and held out the one stamped 'mentally disorientated.' "It can get you out of a lot of chores around here." He lifted his eyes to hers, held her gaze and felt like he finally had his friend back. They shared a moment of laughter before she asked, "Who *are* these people?"

"They're us if we had survived the bombings," Gale leaned against a wall and noticed a bunch of pencils that were scattered around the floor. "A little more anal, but they're just trying to survive."

"I think they're insane. They should be the ones walking around with the bracelet, not me." She sat across from him staring into space before saying, "He's alive."

"Yeah...saw that."

"And he looks so good," Katniss' eyes met Gale's. "Doesn't he? Like that full body polish type of good. Healthy and...not happy, but...oh," she let out a huge gust of air and let her head fall back. "Peeta, you're alive. You're alive," her lips moved as her hand ran over her stomach.

"Hey," Gale stopped her before she went into a huge conversation with her missing husband. "He's not here, Catnip. You can't keep talking to him like he is."

Katniss glared at him. "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do."

"Look," Gale paused, "that didn't come out right. You can talk to him all you want, but...what I'm saying is that there are other people here that you can talk to. Your mom...Prim...Bing...me. We're all here for you, Katniss, and Peeta would hate it if he knew what you were doing."

"Peeta knows what I'm doing," she said quietly. "He can hear me."

Gale wondered if the bracelet she was wearing was accurate. "What do you mean he can *hear* you?"

"Not hear me...hear me, but he can feel me," Katniss got a far off look in her eyes. "I know he can. He has to or else he'll go crazy. It's like...I know he's thinking of me...when things get rough...when he doesn't know what to do...I know he reaches for me and as long I keep talking to him...telling him about things, he'll be okay. It helps me to think I might be helping him somehow."

Gale studied her expression, the way her eyes softened, the way the corner of her lips turned slightly upward when she thought of Peeta. He wondered if he ever looked like that when he thought of Katniss. Gale had always assumed he was in love with her, but did he ever feel the way they felt about each other? "Catnip, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she said in a calm and hushed tone.

If they loved each other so much so why didn't they just get the hell out of Twelve while they had the chance? "Why didn't you two leave? You had the supplies...the tunnel...why didn't you go?"

"Posy." Katniss leaned back and explained. "Remember that Saturday night all of you stayed at mine and Peeta's house?"

Gale could never forget that night. It was burned into his memory forever. "Yeah."

"Well, all the kids were sitting around playing cards when Rory turned on the television. Prim complained about it and Peeta went to shut it off...the kids started talking about Reaping Day and Peeta told her they wouldn't have to worry about that this year then Posy said, 'Well, we want to face it. Lot's of kids at school would like to face the arena like you and Katniss did...stand up to the Capitol. We're not afraid anymore.'" Katniss twisted the hem of her shirt. "Peeta and I were dead set on running away, but then Posy..." She gave her head a little shake, "How many children like her felt that way? Looked at us like we were some kind of heroes? What would we be saying if we ran like cowards and didn't face the Capitol...didn't give the rebels hope? We knew one or both of us would die, but we'd rather die for the right reasons than run and live for the wrong ones."

"I remember that night. Always thought it was just fun for the kids. Never knew it was such a huge turning point in yours and Peeta's lives." It had been a huge one in Gale's though. It was the night Gale realized how much Katniss loved Peeta.

Gale wasn't thrilled with spending the night at Katniss and Peeta's house, but he had to admit, their sofa was more comfortable than his bed was and they had great food. All the kids were spread out on the family room floor with boardgames, cards, dominoes, empty glasses and snack bowls scattered about. His brothers and sister had the time

of their lives. His mom was sleeping upstairs in one of the spare bedrooms, Peeta's dad occupied another one and Katniss' mom went home. The kids could've slept in bedrooms, but chose the floor so they could all talk into the night, not wanting to miss out on a thing. Gale opted to stay on the living room sofa, close enough to the family room to make sure his siblings didn't get into trouble, but far enough away to get some sleep. Katniss and Peeta stayed downstairs with him, cleaning up little bits of mess here and there. Gale had thought they went to bed when he saw the empty living room and went into the small servant's bathroom off of the kitchen. They had so many bathrooms in their house Gale had to stop and think about which one he should use. For some reason, he felt more comfortable using the one meant for the servants. He shut off the light to the restroom and opened the door to see Katniss and Peeta standing at the edge of the kitchen, blocking his exit. The light that led to the pantry was bright enough to show each of their features, the house was so quiet you couldn't help but to hear their every word and Gale was frozen in place not wanting to interrupt their kiss. He didn't know what to do with himself. He turned to go back into the bathroom but he had inadvertently locked the door and was now stuck at the end of the dark hall. He turned the corner and found what he thought was a room, but was actually a closet with the doors removed, lined with baking pans. If it were up to Gale he would've cleared his throat and broken up their heated kiss, right then and there, but Katniss' words to Peeta froze him in place.

"Please don't leave me, Peeta. Don't make me face this world without you," Gale could see her hands traveling up and down his arms.

"Let's not talk about it. Let's just pretend we made it Katniss. That we're living in that world where children don't get reaped and we can love each other freely with no consequences," Peeta caressed the

skin on her face and spoke against her lips. "Will you do that with me? Let's pretend, Katniss."

Gale could see the shadow of Katniss' head moving up and down before she whispered, "Yes. Let's pretend."

Their bodies were flush against each others, Peeta's mouth against Katniss' as he said, "Imagine you and me together. We're not tributes or victors...we're just Katniss and Peeta..." she lifted her fingers to his hair and kissed him deeply.

*Gale had to lift his eyes to the ceiling and close them. How did he stop this? How did he take this moment away from them? The answer was, he didn't. He just stayed still, shut up and when they left, he'd sneak back to his spot in the living room and pretend too. Pretend he never saw or heard a thing. He **could** hear them though, hear the soft sounds of two people kissing. Moist noises, soft smacking sounds coming from swollen lips. Little mewling noises out of Katniss that Gale would've never imagined she'd make.*

"Tell me..." Katniss said between heavy breaths, "...tell me what our life is like."

"We're happy. So damn happy, Katniss," Peeta said gruffly. Gale let his focus drift back down and saw Peeta's fingertips doing a dance up and down the sides of Katniss' body. Her neck, shoulders, arms, waist until finally they reached her hips and pulled her close to him. "I know we said we'd never have kids, but I would...in this world, I'd have kids with you, Katniss." Gale's eyes opened wider.

Katniss had a terrified look in her eyes. "Peeta..." her voice was worried, "I don't think I could...with the Games and everything..."

"There are no Games here, Katniss," Peeta's open mouth ran up her neck and stopped at her ear, "Only us. Only you and me in a world where our children can live without the fear of the arena hanging over their heads." He cupped her cheeks and slid his tongue between her lips. "I'd do it. I'd have kids with you. It's the ultimate statement of love, isn't it?"

Katniss ran her hands lightly over his bottom and pulled him closer to her then let her hands roam up and down his back. "I don't want kids, Peeta. Not even in that kind of world." She tilted her head and ran her foot up the back of his calf. Gale knew she'd answer him that way and for some strange reason it gave him pleasure. Once again he had to turn away from them when he watched Katniss guide Peeta's hands down her body and placed them on an intimate spot of her upper body.

"Someone might see us," Peeta whispered to her and Gale thought, 'Yeah. Like me.'

"Then let's go to our room," Katniss said in a husky tone.

*Gale listened to the sounds of their kissing for several more minutes then there was silence. For a moment he thought it might be safe to head back to the living room until Peeta's voice began to speak. "If power were measured in increments of love, I'd be the most powerful man on earth. Whenever I'm with you...next to you..." Gale **had** to look at them and saw Peeta brushing his open lips against Katniss' while drawing patterns against her cheek and arm with one fingertip, "...touch you...my heart grows that much stronger. I have known the love of a father...of siblings...now I have experienced the love of a mother, but being loved by you is something that can never be matched."*

His voice started to get softer, "I think of the brief twinklings of time when we shared something so special...they were like nothing I've ever experienced in my whole life." Peeta kissed her at a leisurely pace. "Like during the thunderstorm..."he bumped his open lips against hers.

Katniss lifted up her hand up to the middle of his back and caressed it, "I'll never forget day...night. Not as long as I live."

Gale wondered what happened in the middle of the thunderstorm they spoke about and then decided it was better if he didn't know when he heard Peeta continue. "Neither will I. Each touch...each kiss...I remember the way your hair felt. So soft...like spun silk." Peeta pulled the band out of her braid and threaded his fingers through her hair as Katniss looked longingly into his eyes, "The way your lips felt when they met mine..." He placed a kiss as soft as a butterfly's wing against her slightly parted lips, "Those are the moments when I no longer exist as a mere man. That's when you and I become we..."

Katniss placed her hand gingerly over the center of his chest, "When we become one and I lose my heart to you all over again."

"Don't you ever wonder, Katniss? How something so powerful could stem from a girl from the Seam and a merchant's son?" Katniss sighed in answer to Peeta's question. "You see, I already know the answer. We were meant to be. Before our parents were born...or their parents for that matter." He ran his lips up the side of her face, back and forth and continually spoke to her in a tone so mesmerizing that even Gale started to believe what Peeta was saying. "Before any of this even happened...the Dark Days...the Games...somewhere...something out there," his glance flashed out the window towards the starry sky then back to Katniss again, "knew there could be no up without down...no right without wrong...no good without

evil. So the plan for our lives was set into motion. A boy met a girl...married her and together they had a son. That son fell in love with a girl from the Seam even though he was from town, he didn't care." Gale was sure Peeta was talking about he and Katniss, but then Peeta said something strange, "That boy left home and worked as a handyman throughout his district taking with him the only thing, other than the clothes on his back, that mattered to him, a locket and a pin. He left his life behind to marry that girl. They could've sold those items and fed their family. Instead they passed it down to their grandson who gave the pin to the girl he loved...the girl he lost in the arena as they battled against forty-six other children." 'Forty-six!' Gale tried to figure out who Peeta was talking about and then it hit him, Haymitch's Quell. "That poor boy spent his life drowning his sorrows over the only girl he ever loved and then..." Peeta brushed his thumbs in little circles next to Katniss' lips. "Then there was a woman from town who loved a coal-miner. She could've had my dad, but she loved yours instead," Peeta and Katniss shared a soft smile. "Aren't we lucky your mother didn't love my father back?" Peeta accepted Katniss' tender kiss. "Then came you and I. The second your eyes met mine across that classroom our fate was sealed. The birds sang your song and wove your melody into my heart, binding us together for eternity and call it fate...call it destiny...religion or mumbo jumbo, but something out there caused all of these events to occur just so our lives could cross paths that day and continue to cross paths until that one moment in time when everything changed. How many times throughout our lives did we have the opportunity to meet? To fall in love?"

"So many," Katniss answered softly.

"Yeah," Peeta nodded, "but none of it really mattered until the world was watching. It mattered to you and me, but our love...this wonderful thing we share between us, it's more than simply you and me. The

moment you kissed me in that cave the whole world fell in love right along with us and who are we to say that what we feel isn't powerful enough to make that kind of an impact on people's lives? That's why Katniss...why I'm the most powerful man on earth when it comes to love." He brushed his nose against hers. "Because our love has been in the works for centuries."

"Peeta, I don't want to lose you," Katniss took in a choppy breath.

"You'll never lose me...I've been yours since before time began and I'll remain yours till the earth stands still." Peeta kissed her tenderly.

"Peeta," Katniss whispered against his lips, twirled her fingers through his hair. "How do you say things like that? Find those words?"

"My heart speaks for me," he kissed her gently. "What is your heart telling you, Katniss?"

She ran her hands across his face, brushed her thumbs over his cheeks, at the corners of his lips and looked lovingly into his eyes. "It's telling me that I don't want children. I never have, but I would do it, Peeta. In your world where life is good and things like the Games can't harm us. I'd have your baby."

*Gale couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You mean you'd **want** to have kids, Katniss?" Peeta asked her as he trailed the tip of his tongue against her bottom lip.*

*"No, Peeta. I don't want kids," she pushed him slightly away, "but I'd have yours. I'd want to have **yours**, Peeta."*

It was that night that Gale had thought of when Peeta had announced her pregnancy on live television. He was certain that his words had somehow convinced Katniss to have a baby, but thinking back on it

now, he could see much clearer that Peeta wasn't trying to talk Katniss into having a child, but letting her know their choice to go back into the arena was okay with him. They had a responsibility to the people of the districts that believed in them and what they represented. "Katniss, did you want to go into the Quell?" Gale asked her as she brushed her hand over Peeta's sweatshirt like she had his hair that night not too long ago.

"Who would want to, Gale," she answered. "I *had* to. Peeta and I both knew how important we were to the rebellion's efforts. He tried to talk me out of it. Asked me to run away with you and our families, but I refused go."

Gale could just picture Peeta trying to convince Katniss that she could have a happy life without him. "I'm glad you didn't run. You two did the right thing."

Katniss held onto the sweatshirt and checked on the napkin full of food for Buttercup's consumption. "I still can't believe they let him say that at the end," she shook her head. "Why bother even having him say the rest of that stuff if he was going to finish it up with that?"

Bewilderment filled Gale's eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Peeta," Katniss answered. "Why would Snow let him say that at the end of the interview?"

Gale still didn't get where her head was. Lately she was all over the map. "The last thing he did was call for a cease fire."

"No," there was confusion written all over her face. "Not that. I'm talking about after that."

"You mean about building card houses?" Gale asked wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Gale," Katniss sat straight up and turned to him, "didn't you hear what Peeta said to me before that?"

"He didn't say anything, Catnip. I saw him move his lips a little, but..." Gale shook his head, "...Peeta didn't say a word."

"Oh no," Katniss let out a worried huff of air. "So everyone here thinks he's a traitor."

"Come on, Catnip. No one's going to pay attention to that stuff he was saying. They'll probably think he made a deal with Snow or something for your safety. To protect you and..." Gale stopped himself before saying the baby.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and said, "Me and the baby."

Gale nodded. "Hey, Catnip. I've been meaning to talk to you about that...the baby. I didn't mean to..."

"Stop!" Katniss held her hand up. "What is wrong with everybody. I said I don't want to talk about it and I don't. Not until Peeta gets here. When he gets back then I'll talk about it. Until then...just leave it alone Gale."

He looked to the side, "So you do blame me?"

"What?" Katniss turned to him. "Is that what you think? That this is your fault...any of this?"

"Isn't it?" Gale asked.

Katniss scrambled to her knees and hugged him. "Oh Gale, I'm so sorry. I've been horrible to you haven't I? Treating you so badly and all this time you thought I was blaming you for...for the baby?"

Gale hugged her back. He had to admit, it felt nice to hold her again. "Yeah. I was pretty sure that's why you were so mad at me."

Katniss pulled away but held onto his hand. "The baby has nothing to do with this...tension between you and I. That's me...all me. Okay," she admitted with a nervous smile, "maybe some of it is you." Katniss studied his hand then said, "You keep trying to take care of me and I hate it."

"I'm just trying to be your friend." Gale gave her hand a little shake.

"Sometimes it seems like you're trying to be more than that and, please don't take this the wrong way, but...I don't need you to take care of me, Gale. I have a husband for that and he's coming back. He *is* coming back to me." Katniss said with certainty in her voice. "I know you had feelings for me and I thought we got past them, but you keep doing things that Peeta would normally do for me and..." she let out a frustrated sigh, dropping his hand in the process, "...it drives me insane, because I know...I just know you're doing it because Peeta asked you to."

Gale ducked his head down like a little boy. "That doesn't mean I wouldn't have tried to help you on my own accord you know."

"Ooh," Katniss moved her lips and started ranting at Peeta. "I knew it! You asked him to take care of me, didn't you? When you get back here I'm going to kick your ass. First I'm going to kiss you and then I'm going to kick your ass. Don't you know no one can take your..."

"Hey, Catnip. Would you mind not doing that? It kind of freaks me out," Gale gave her a strange look. "I mean...if you want to yell at Peeta when I'm not in the same room with you, that's one thing, but...you're yelling at him and...Damn, Katniss I can't hear you screaming, but I know you are...in your head I mean. I kind of feel bad for the guy. He's not even here to defend himself."

"Fine!" Katniss snapped at Gale. "Then I'll yell at you!" She put her hand on her hip. "When did the two of you decide on my future? And what gave you two the right to discuss it to begin with? Like I don't have the right to decide for myself? If I want to wallow and walk around here talking to myself like the village idiot than I have that right. If I want to yell at a wall then I can do that too! What I *don't* have to do is play by the rules that my friend and my husband have set for me."

"Peeta was worried about you. He didn't think he'd make it out of the arena and he wanted me to be here for you. That's it. It's not like he wanted me to marry you or anything," Gale said with a hint of anger in his voice. He was just doing what her husband wanted, after all.

"No, that's exactly what he expected. That man thought I could just write him off and hand my heart...our baby over to you and let you take his place like he never mattered...like he didn't...didn't..." Katniss started to sniff, picked up a box of chalk and hurled it across the closet. "I love you, Gale. I do. You have been my friend since I was a kid, but I'm not..." she turned to face him and said quietly, "I'm not in love with you and I'll never be in love with you...with anyone else. I gave my whole heart to Peeta Mellark and I don't ever want it back."

"I know that." Gale wiped at the now dried blood underneath his nose. "I've known for quite sometime now, but I was just too stubborn to accept it. You know, Catnip...as much as I thought I loved you, I don't think I ever loved you the way you two love each other. Don't get me

wrong, I wanted to. I thought...maybe I did, but...If I were being honest with myself...if you died in the arena, I'd live. Probably get married in the future...life would go on. I'd hurt for a long time, but I'd survive."

"I can't survive without him, Gale," she breathed softly. "There's really no purpose if he's not a part of my life."

"Then we better figure out a way to get him back here," Gale threw his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a hug. "Let's bring Peeta home where he belongs."

"There's only one way I know how to do that." Katniss gave him a squeeze then sat back on her haunches. "I'm going to have to be the Mockingjay."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 4: Jabberjay's Defense, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Three: Jabberjay's Defense

So far Katniss has been deemed loony tunes, and keeps trying to find some sort of comfort from talking to Peeta even though he's not there. Peeta's hijacking has begun and he's having a difficult time keeping a hold of reality. In this chapter, he gets help from an unlikely source. He also mouthed something to Katniss at the end of his damning interview with Caesar Flickerman. Did the rebels notice? Did Snow?

Thank you to all of you for reading and reviewing. I would like to remind all of you that I am writing a ROMANCE/DRAMA based on Katniss and Peeta. This is not a Katniss/Peeta/Gale fic. Thank you to my betas, S and A. I appreciate all of your hard work. BB, I know things have been rough lately and I want to tell you how much I appreciate all that you do for me. Thanks!

Anyone in the mood to find out what's happening with...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

The soft crying of Annie Crest echoed through the Capitol's prison cells, and Johanna was certain she was going to pull the hairs out of her own head from sheer insanity. Between Peeta talking to an invisible Katniss and Annie's crying, along with several other mentor's that had gotten left behind during the rebel's rescue mission complaining, Johanna was almost looking forward to her daily torture session so she could get some semblance of peace. "Shut up," she said quietly as she paced back and forth in the dark recesses of her cell. "All of you need to shut the hell up." She ran her scaly fingers through her tufts of hair and listened once more as Annie's sobs pierced her eardrums. "Oh, for the love of God shut the hell up!" She

grabbed onto the bars and shook her arms, imagining it was the crying victor. "I can't take this anymore! You're stuck here like the rest of us! Get over it!" She whipped herself around and faced the back wall, catching Peeta's eye as she turned. "What?" She glared at him.

"A little tense, Johanna?" Peeta asked her with a hint of aggression in his voice. "I'm not too crazy about the noise either, but the last thing we need is to turn on each other, so quit your bitching."

Johanna arched a brow and sashayed the few feet towards Peeta's cell. "Holy shit. Are you actually pissed at me Peeta?" This was a revelation.

"It's not like I don't get angry," his eyes, which were normally a bright blue, looked almost black.

"Yeah, I know you do, but it's usually because you're defending Fireball." Johanna slid her back down the wall and took a seat close to him, the bars of the jail the only thing separating them.

"What fireball?" Peeta gave her a strange look.

"For Christ sake!" She blew out an exasperated breath. "Not what. *Who*. Who! Fireball is a who."

"Fine," Peeta snapped at her. "Who's Fireball?"

'Oh goody,' Johanna thought to herself as she rolled her head back, 'It's story time.' "Fireball is your wife...mother of your child..."

"Pain in her ass," another prisoner's voice squeaked out from a neighboring cell.

Johanna held a hand towards the mentor from District Six that had been brought down to join the festivities. "Even he knows who I'm talking about. Now come on and think. Who am I talking about?"

"Wife?! Screw you! I'm not married, and I sure as hell didn't get anyone pregnant!" His body began to shake and he took a few deep breaths then he said in a calmer tone of voice, "I don't know anyone named Fireball."

"That's not her real name. You do know her, and you are married ,and you are going to be a father so quit yelling at me because I didn't tell you to knock the bitch up," Johanna leaned closer to the cell but stayed a fair distance away from him. "Now think. Who could be Fireball?"

Peeta rubbed his eyes with his fists and made a guess, "Fireball...uh...Portia?"

"Geez," Johanna was quickly growing weary of repeating the same process every day. Wake up in the middle of the night to someone's screams, either because of a nightmare or because they were being tortured. Something moldy or spoiled to eat and enough liquid to keep them from dehydrating, but not enough to quench their thirst. Someone getting pulled from their cell to be beaten for information they didn't have, none of the people from the districts other than herself and Peeta knew anything about the rebellion and Peeta was forgetting almost everything to do with Katniss so Johanna had no clue if he remembered anything about the rebellion. Getting brought into a room and dipped into ice baths, or having her hands tied above her head and being lowered into a tub of water just low enough so her eyes could see above the waterline, but her nose and mouth submerged beneath, and then there was Peeta's daily memory lapses which were growing longer and more violent. Throw into that the

sound of Annie's crying and death was beginning to sound better and better with each passing minute. "Okay," she let out a breath. "Try and picture the girl. You still hear her, right?"

"Yeah," Peeta eyed up Johanna cautiously.

"Still see her?"

"Sometimes, but she's been fading a lot. I can't really make out her features anymore except..." he lowered his voice down, "I can remember her eyes and her nose."

"Then let's start there." It usually took awhile, Johanna probing Peeta with questions about the girl he saw in his head each day, but he always wound up remembering who she was though lately it was taking longer and longer for him to put it together. Today it took him, by Johanna's estimations, about an hour, or maybe it just felt that way to her since her time with these people was causing premature aging.

Peeta's eyes finally looked a little more normal, his temper wasn't as violent, but he sounded worn out by the time he finally remembered who Katniss was. "Johanna, I don't want to forget her." He turned his head towards Johanna and looked at her with tears in her eyes. "All I can think of are those horrible images they play for me of her and Gale. How do I know they're not real? What if they are? What if..." Peeta started to silently cry, "...if she actually did have something going on with Gale behind my back? That baby could be his, Johanna."

"Now that's the biggest crock I've ever heard," Johanna wrapped her arms around her up-drawn knees. "I happen to know for a fact that she'd never do that to you."

"How can you be so sure when I can't...and she's *supposed* to be my wife?"

"First off, she *is* your wife...at least you both act like you're married and second..." she sighed in resignation, "Because..." Johanna really didn't want to admit this. "God, I hate my life." She lifted her eyes to the ceiling then let them meet Peeta's. "She loves you, okay. Now don't make me sit here and get all mushy and shit. I hate that crap."

"Do you really think she loves me?" Peeta wiped the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Okay, look...if I tell you something, you have to swear you won't tell her I told you about it. Then again, the way you've been lately, you'll probably forget I told you about it in about an hour so..." Johanna shrugged. "Might as well spill my guts."

"Spill your guts about what?" Peeta gave her an expectant look.

"It happened in the arena...the night she was trapped in the jabberjay section and you two were on guard. You walked her back to the campsite and...she was all weepy and crap and..." 'My life SUCKS!' Johanna's mind was reeling. "And she told me some stuff about you and Gale and that damn kid of yours."

The sound of sniffing was soooo annoying. Johanna had been listening to Katniss' bellyaching for at least an hour, 'Okay, maybe it's been ten minutes, but still... Freaking cinnamon buns had to go and make her cry. Then again a gust of wind seems to make her cry lately.' Johanna rolled her eyes and said to Katniss, "Some of us are trying to sleep here. Mind keeping your whining to a minimum?"

Johanna had been expecting an argument from Katniss, or at least a smart ass remark, but the girl simply wiped her eyes with the back of

her hands and mumbled, "Sorry." She tucked her knees up to her chest and hugged them, squeezed her eyes shut and looked like she was going to go to sleep.

After a few minutes of silence Johanna heard the sniffing start up again and rolled over. "For Christ sake. Are you seriously bawling? So Peeta kissed you goodnight and got all sappy on your ass. Suck it up."

"Shut up, Johanna," Katniss' voice cracked. "He didn't say goodnight, he said goodbye. Goodbye. Okay? Sorry if I'm upset over the impending death of my husband. I really didn't mean to interrupt your beauty sleep, God knows you need it," Katniss threw her a glare through her tears.

Johanna stopped herself from telling her Peeta wasn't going to die, because she really had no clue whether or not any of them would survive until they were broken out of the Games. "At least you got to say goodbye to him. Know how many of us wish we had that chance? A lot." She meant for it to come out sounding like she was pissed off, too bad she sounded like she felt bad for the girl. "Shit," Johanna murmured to herself. If there was one thing Johanna hated, it was showing compassion. To her it was just handing the Capitol another weapon to use against her.

"What are you...shitting over?" Katniss asked her. "Did I offend you?" She shot her legs straight out and said, "Too damn bad."

"No," Johanna narrowed her eyes, ready to warn Katniss to back off, "I wasn't offended. You have to actually care about someone to take offense to what they say, and I couldn't give a rat's ass about you or cinnamon buns for that matter."

Katniss lifted her head a little and gave her ally a strange look. "Cinnamon buns?"

'Man, I'm really stepping in it tonight,' Johanna thought to herself. "Screw it." The only reason she kept the nickname away from Katniss was because of Finnick, but he wasn't here and Johanna wanted to prove her point about not caring. "It's my little nickname for Peeta." She tucked her hands under her head, lay on her back and crossed her ankles, giving the impression of a very relaxed person. "He always smells like cinnamon and I like his ass. Cinnamon Buns."

Katniss' eyes flew open at Johanna's admission. Again Johanna was surprised by Katniss' reaction. She expected fury when talking about Peeta that way, instead Katniss' hand covered her mouth so her laugh couldn't escape. Katniss took a few breaths out of her nose and said in a particularly unresponsive voice, "I'm partial to his abs myself, but his butt is cute."

There was a smile of approval across Johanna's face when she looked at Katniss. "Okay, I'm just going to admit it, and don't take this the wrong way, because he's way too young for me, but cinnamon buns is hot. He's no Finnick Odair, but...damn when I saw him wearing that tight uniform during training this year, I couldn't believe my eyes." She thought for a brief second about his body. "Yeah...he does have good abs."

"Why am I not shooting you right now?" It was obvious by the tone in Katniss' voice she was trying to get a grip on their topic of conversation.

Johanna smirked a little. "My mom used to say, put two women in a room together and within fifteen minutes they're either talking about their menstrual cycle, childbirth or sex."

Katniss eyed up Johanna. "I'm not exactly sure where this topic of conversation falls under those three categories."

"Sex. Definitely sex. Speaking of...it's been awhile. How is the sex?" Johanna asked with a wag of her brows. "Good? Great? Mediocre?"

"Okay, I might actually shoot you now." Katniss shook her head. "There are some things I'm not willing to discuss and that's one of them."

"That good huh?" Johanna let out a little huff of air. "Bet he's one of those guys that always puts you first."

"Johanna!" Katniss was taken aback by the comment. "Do you mind? This is my private life you're discussing here."

The look on Katniss' face said it all. "Yup, he's one of those," Johanna gave her a devilish grin. "I used to have a guy like that. Actually gave a damn about me...put me first."

"What happened? Did he realize that you're a pain in the ass and dump you?"

"He got all...clingy and who needs that shit? Not me." Johanna was glad she got rid of him too. He was too nice for her. She needed someone with a little more fire. "Must suck for you though...Peeta being all sweet and everything. Don't you just want him to throw you on the ground and ...go for it?" Johanna asked with wide eyes.

"Seriously, I am not having this conversation with you. I can't believe..." Katniss lifted her hands to her cheeks to hide her blush. "Please stop talking about my sex life."

"Peeta?!" Johanna asked with shock. "No way! You mean he..." there was a modicum of respect in her voice when she said, "Who knew cinnamon buns had passion in him?"

"I did," Katniss answered then clapped her hand over her mouth. "Shit," she chided herself for jumping at Johanna's bait.

"Now look who's shitting." Surprisingly Johanna was enjoying herself with Katniss. "You know fireball, I think this is the longest we've ever talked without trying to kill each other."

The woman had an excellent point. "Who knew all it would take was for you to talk about my husband's ass." Katniss met Johanna's wicked view with her own and both women let out a little burst of laughter. "I wonder if this is what it's like to have a perverted older sister?" Katniss asked with as straight as a face as she could muster up and they both started to laugh again. After a long pause Katniss said, "Didn't mean to wake you up tonight. I know you haven't slept much."

Johanna settled into her position. "It wasn't you. Finnick woke me up with all his whining." Her eyes rolled towards Katniss', "He's actually more annoying than you when he cries. However, I would like to go to sleep."

"Yeah, me too. I think I might be able to now."

Johanna rolled over and said, "Sure, now that I've given you something to dream about. I think I'm going to stick to Odair. He looks pretty good dripping with water and that trident in his hand. Plus I'll be dreaming so I can shove a sock in his mouth to stop that damn crying."

"Finnick Odair has nothing on Peeta Mellark," Katniss had said this to herself once before, but this time her thoughts actually came out of her mouth.

*"Damn, if you're saying that, then Peeta must be pretty good."
Johanna had been wondering about something for awhile and thought she might as well take a shot and ask about it. "So, what happened in that cave under that sleeping bag last year?"*

"Nothing," Katniss grinned. "We just kissed each other."

"And you had to hide it? Must've been some kiss."

Johanna watched as Katniss' fingers brushed across her lips before saying, "It was."

"So," Johanna cleared her throat, "what's up with all the tears tonight? I know he said goodbye to you, but..." she faced Katniss, "...I thought you were stronger than all this weepy, girly crap you've been pulling lately. You used to have balls. What the hell happened to you?"

"Funny...I was wondering the same thing myself." Katniss stretched her arm out and rested her head against it. "Until someone reminded me that these mood changes go along with being pregnant." She stuck her finger in the sand and buried it for no reason but to avoid looking at Johanna. "I'm not very good at being pregnant. Suck at it actually."

"You're telling me," Johanna agreed with her. "If there were warning labels on pregnant women that listed side effects, you'd have every single one of them."

"Not true," Katniss corrected her. "Some women tend to faint and I haven't."

"Yet," Johanna smirked. "Give it time, I'm sure you'll do that too. Gotta be honest here, if you're the example of what strong women turn into when they get knocked up...bet there are thousands of girls across

the nation looking at you as their form of birth control right now."
Johanna thought that was pretty funny.

"Ha. Ha." Katniss was already disappointed in herself. She didn't need Johanna rubbing it in. "Yup, get pregnant and turn into a sniveling coward just like me."

"A coward? Now that's the one thing I can say you're not."

"Don't try and be nice, Johanna. It's not your style," Katniss almost sneered at her.

"Is that what you think? That I'm trying to be nice?" Johanna let out a little chuckle. "You're right, that is definitely not my style. Look, you came into these Games with a...don't really want to call it a handicap, but in a way it is, and you're still ready to kick some serious ass. Got to give credit where credit is due."

"Yeah, I was so ready to kick ass I jumped into the ocean when the Careers attacked you guys at the Cornucopia," Katniss spit out.

"That took a lot of guts, fireball. For people like us...we face danger, it's in our nature, so when you dove into that water and fought against everything you...are..." Johanna hated to admit it, and she still wasn't sure if she liked Katniss or not, but she admired the girl's gusto.

"Sometimes, running takes more courage than fighting. You did what you had to do to save that brat of yours. Who can blame you for that? I'd like to, but I can't," she gave Katniss a firm nod. "Stop taking everything so damn seriously. You need to lighten up and give yourself a break every now and then. I didn't blame myself for Blight walking into the force field. We could've stayed put and toughed out the rain, but I insisted that we move on. Don't see me feeling guilty about it."

"Oh, I don't feel guilty," Katniss wanted to set the record straight. "I'm fine with my choice. I'm just not too thrilled about the way it made me feel."

"Feelings can be controlled," Johanna knew this from experience. "Tune the shit out and move on. Tomorrow will be another day and we'll have another challenge. In the meantime...try not to cry so damn much. It seriously gets on my last nerve."

"I'm not too thrilled about it either, but it's not like I can control this. Too bad there's no off button for the tears. I hate crying. It pisses me off."

"Me too. Your crying pisses me off royally," Johanna actually smiled. "Your puking on the other hand is music to my ears."

"Mine too," Katniss smiled as she let her hand rest against her stomach. "After that first night out here we didn't know if the baby was all right or not. Since then my morning sickness, which is a load of crap by the way, it happens morning, noon and night, it's gotten progressively worse."

"The kid's okay." Johanna was glad for the girl. "Have you always wanted to have kids?"

"Never!" Katniss stated. "Peeta and I never, ever wanted to have a child. Thoughts of it being reaped..." Katniss shook her head. "No, we were too afraid to ever have a baby."

"Then how did this happen?" Johanna made a gesture towards her stomach. "You don't have to go into great detail or anything...unless you want to," she arched her brow in an encouraging manor.

"You're a pig." Katniss was getting used to the woman's crass comments.

"There's nothing wrong with a little vicarious living."

*"Choose someone else's life to live through. Mine sucks...well...not **all** of it, but this whole arena thing sucks." Katniss paused. "My life hasn't been a bed of roses or anything, but Peeta," she grinned, "cinnamon buns...he makes me happy. Since we got married, we had some rough times, but the good times...they outweighed the bad. Even our bad times are good. At least we're together."*

"So you decided to get knocked up and...what...give yourself a challenge?" Johanna was trying to understand why the girl let it happen.

"We didn't decide to have a baby. It was an accident. We..." Katniss sighed before admitting, "Peeta and I had been concentrating on training for the Games and in the process our relationship took a beating. When it got to the point in which we had to choose what came first, us or training for the Games, we chose us. Truth is...if it hadn't been for my cousin, Gale, this baby probably never would've been here."

"What the hell does your cousin have to do with this? He didn't..." Johanna made a weird face. "Ew."

"Dear God. NO! Does your mind always go to the gutter?"

"If I'm lucky," Johanna answered honestly.

"Gale and Peeta became friends while we were in Twelve...shocked the hell out of me..." Katniss explained, "Gale saw the way we were acting with one another...stand offish, avoiding contact...none of which was my idea, but Peeta thought...well, he thought we should concentrate on training. Get as strong as possible before entering the arena, but somewhere in the process things between him and I got so

tense. I mean...we fight," Katniss kind of grinned. "We fight a lot, but we always make up."

"So, you two had a big blow out or something?" This was getting interesting in Johanna's mind.

"No. Not at all and that was the problem. Peeta and I are actually better when we argue back and forth. We have a spat about something, usually once, and then it's all worked out, and like I said...we do make up with each other, but we hadn't fought at all. We hadn't done much of anything at all except train."

"What does Gale have to do with this?" Johanna wondered.

"Since he and Peeta had developed a friendship, Gale asked him what was going on between the two of us, it was blatantly obvious there was something up, and when Peeta told him what was going on, Gale pretty much called us both idiots and set us both straight. He helped us to see our priorities, which helped because Peeta and I had a fight, and later on that night..." Katniss trailed off.

Johanna gave her a nod of approval. "I'm guessing you did some serious making up."

"We got our lives back that night. We were Mr. and Mrs. Mellark again," she beamed. "No, I never wanted to have a baby, but I'm not sorry. I'll never be sorry for carrying Peeta's child. How could I?" Katniss rolled her head towards Johanna, "Peeta once said that having a child is the ultimate statement of love..." her eyes drifted towards the heavens, "...and he was right." She trailed her fingertips under her navel. "All I can say is, thank goodness for Gale's intervention. If he hadn't said something to both of us, we'd never have this baby and even though I didn't want kids, it's here and I won't go wishing it away...I'm thankful for it."

"Okay. That's enough of that. All your syrupy love crap is making me sick." Johanna rolled over, facing away from Katniss. "Try and remember some of that shit the next time you feel like crying. Maybe it'll save me a headache if you can muster up a happy thought or something."

"Yeah," Katniss closed her eyes then said, "Hey, Johanna...thanks."

"For what?"

"Making me laugh."

Johanna hadn't meant to help the girl, but she had. "Yeah...whatever. Shut up and go to sleep before I make you cry again."

There was complete silence in the jail cells surrounding Johanna. Every prisoner, even the Peacekeepers had been listening to her regale Peeta with the tale about Katniss. "Great," Johanna scanned her onlookers gazes. "I'm not the nightly entertainment so quit staring."

Peeta reached between the bars and touched her hand, "Thanks. I needed to hear that...a lot."

It was the first time she had seen Peeta look like his old self since he was in the arena. "Yeah, well... Don't go thinking I'm gonna be livening up this joint with Katniss and Peeta stories. I've got better things to do." She tilted her head a little and gave him a miniscule smile.

"Oh yeah. Like what?" Peeta took his hand from hers and rested it on his own leg. "Got a hot date?"

The sound of the heavy door that led to the prison opened quickly followed by the stomping of boots. Johanna didn't move. She knew

they were there for her. It was punishment for bringing Peeta back to reality after all the hard work the Capitol was putting into tearing the kid apart. The white uniformed guards stood in front of her cell door before their leader waved his hand in front of the lock and released it. Johanna stood up, turned to Peeta and said, "Looks like my date is here. Try not to forget her while I'm gone."

"Johanna," Peeta's voice cracked as he reached through the cell's bars in a feeble attempt to grab onto her. "I won't forget her Johanna! I won't!" Peeta called out to her as she was being dragged by the arms out the door and to her water torture chamber.

She held her head high, took a deep breath and thought, 'Go ahead and do what you want. It was worth it.'

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The worst part of Katniss' life since leaving the arena was bedtime. It wasn't so bad when Peeta was around. The warmth of his body...his arms cradling her whether it was in their bed, in a cave, on a train or on the beach, always provided a source of security for her, but he wasn't there. All she had of him was the few items she brought from home and the items she kept secure inside of a tiny silver parachute in the arena. When she was brought to Thirteen they confiscated her bow and arrows, no one was allowed weapons except the soldiers that patrolled the underground city as well as the medications she was

provided in the arena for their medical bay. Katniss was left with the parachute, the spile and the pearl Peeta had given to her on the beach. Each night she would lie in bed and rub the smooth surface of the pearl between her fingertips in an attempt to summon Peeta's strength from it to no avail and when it failed, as it usually did, she would sneak into her mother and sister's quarters with the hopes of warding off the loneliness that plagued her.

Prim could hear the shuffling of the air vent cover and rolled over in bed. It was Katniss making her way into their home in Thirteen via the air ducts so she could avoid the guards that patrolled the halls at night. She got out of bed and moved a chair closer so Katniss would have something to step on when she climbed out, her mother had no clue about the late night visits, and she always moved the chair back to its proper place before she went to bed. "Hey," Prim whispered to her sister's dangling feet. "Couldn't sleep again?"

Katniss' outstretched toes reached for the chair and stepped comfortably onto it. "No." Most nights her sister was still in bed and all she had to do was curl up behind Prim, then go back home before her mother woke up. Tonight however, Prim was wide away. "You should go back to sleep, Prim. I didn't mean to wake you."

"That's okay." Prim held her sister's hand, giving her a helping hand off of the chair. "I couldn't sleep either. Not after seeing Peeta's broadcast."

Katniss froze in place. "Tell me you don't believe the things he said about the war, Prim." She couldn't take it if her sister of all people lost faith in Peeta.

Prim, who was walking towards her bed, stopped in her tracks and gave her sister a worried expression. "Why would I think that? Do *you* believe it, Katniss?"

"No," she whispered harshly. "Of course not, but..." Katniss had been worried sick about everyone's reactions to Peeta's interview with Caesar. She had wanted to go talk to President Coin about it, but Gale had told her she needed to think about what she wanted to say before going into the control room and coming to Peeta's defense. In his words, she'd most likely get pissed off at someone and 'blow a gasket' then she wouldn't be doing Peeta any good. "I'm just worried about him, that's all." Katniss wasn't about to get her sister worried too, so she stopped talking about it.

As Prim lifted the covers, she felt the cool skin of Katniss' legs touching her. "You need to wear some pants if you're going to climb through the air vents. You might hurt yourself."

Climbing through the vents was the least of Katniss' problems. She'd only be able to get away with that for a few more weeks anyway. After that, she wasn't sure what her body would look like or feel like for that matter. "Let's go to sleep," she suggested.

Prim held onto her sister's hand under the covers and whispered to her, "You can talk to me you know. I'm a good listener and I know how to keep secrets," she stole a glance at their mother, "even from mom." She gave Katniss a sly grin then added, "Even from *you*."

"What?" Katniss' eyes flew open. "What secrets have you been keeping from me?"

"Well, you didn't know about me and Peeta, did you?" Prim rolled onto her side to face her sister. "And we were friends for a long time before you two ever started dating."

Her sister brought up a very good point and Katniss really did need to share her concerns with someone that loved Peeta just as much as she did. "Prim, I'm going to agree to be the Mockingjay tomorrow."

"Because you want to or because you have to?" Prim asked.

With that one question the idea of Prim being able to hold onto some of her childhood while in this new district was wiped away from Katniss' mind. Her sister knew then...knew that the rebels were using Katniss and Peeta for the war. "A little of both I guess," Katniss answered her honestly. "The thought of kids...anyone really...starving, being worked to death just so the people of the Capitol can live their lavish lifestyles haunts me." She rolled to her side and mirrored Prim's position. "The few times we were there, Peeta and I never understood how those people could live their lives like that...waste so much, when there are so many in this world that would kill...*have* killed for just a taste of what they have."

"What do they have?" Prim had only seen it on television and was always curious about the place, but all she ever got out of her sister and brother was a change of topic in their conversation.

"Too much." Katniss remembered the Victory Tour banquet in which people were throwing up so they could continue to eat. "The thing is, most of those people don't know any better and the ones that do, don't care. As a matter of fact, they like it the way it is. Using the residents of the districts as their slaves and reminding them how powerful they are every year with the Games." Katniss rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling.

"If you could pick one reason to be the Mockingjay, not because you had to, but because you wanted to, what would it be?" Prim asked and wondered if Katniss' answer would be Peeta.

"To end the Games." Katniss' hand trailed beneath Peeta's pajama shirt and ran along the waistband of her underwear and lost herself in thought. "Peeta and I were always of one mind when it came to that. We knew our child would have to go into the arena which is why we

never wanted kids to begin with, but now...everything is different. I can't let the Capitol remain in charge of this nation...of our baby's future. And if Peeta were here I know he'd agree with me." There was dead silence in the room then Prim's hand found Katniss' under her pajamas.

"Katniss?" She looked at her sister with questioning eyes. Prim knew her sister inside and out. She had seen her crumble into pieces when she and Peeta stopped seeing each other after they won their Games and they were still living across the street from one another. Prim had wondered why Katniss hadn't really mourned the loss of her baby and now Prim had to wonder... "Katniss?"

She rolled to face Prim and saw it, felt her sister's fingertips against her stomach and Katniss knew she had seriously screwed up. "Prim," she rolled over and held onto her by the upper arms. "You can't tell anyone. You can't."

"Oh Katniss," Prim's eyes grew with delight. "You are? Really?"

Katniss nodded her head yes and felt her sister's arms wrap around her with joy. It was a welcoming feeling having someone to share this with. "Please promise me you won't say a thing. Prim, it could be so dangerous if you told."

"I won't. I swear it. They can beat me till I'm blue in the face and I'd never break my word to you about this, but... why does everyone think you lost it?"

"I can't tell you that, Prim." Katniss let out a small sigh. "Please, Oh God, please forget you even know about this."

Then Prim realized why. "It's because of this Mockingjay thing isn't it?" Katniss' eyes said it all. Prim was concerned for her sister's well being

as well as the life she was carrying. "Katniss, how can you be the Mockingjay if you're still pregnant?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll have to figure it out. If I don't, then...we're all in trouble, aren't we?"

"Not necessarily," Prim took her sister's hand and squeezed it. "I don't think you realize how important you are to this war Katniss. You can ask for anything you want and they'll give it to you."

"Like believing Peeta's innocent of treason?"

"Like *anything*," Prim assured her. "They need you a lot more than you need them. Think about it. The war isn't going to stop if you decide not to fill your role. They'll keep on going until they either kill each other off or someone eventually wins. It might take longer, but you not agreeing to be the Mockingjay won't be the end of the war."

"What are you thinking Prim?" Katniss was very glad her sister was awake when she got here tonight.

"I'm thinking you're the one with the power here, Katniss. How you use it is up to you."

Her head was going a mile a minute now. She began thinking about all the things she could demand from President Coin in return for her being the Mockingjay. "First thing on my list is that they go get my husband," Katniss crossed her arms over her chest as she looked up at the ceiling. "He's been gone way too long and it's time he came home to me."

Prim leaned her head on her sister's shoulder. "To all of us." There was a moment of silence before Prim said, "I miss him so much,

Katniss. Everything seems gray without him around. He brought so much color to our lives."

"Oh, Prim." Katniss put her arm around her sister and comforted her. "Guess I never really stopped to think how his absence was affecting you." She kissed the top of her sister's head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If I'm hurting this bad, I can't even imagine what you're going through...or his dad, but he's been so strong for us, hasn't he? Taking care of us just like Peeta would...or when dad was alive." It had crossed Katniss' mind too many times, but Prim was right. Having Peeta's father there was like having their own dad back at times.

"That's my pops. He's the best isn't he?"

"Second best," Prim corrected. "Peeta's the best."

"You're right about that one." Katniss felt her sister's hand reach for her stomach again. "Prim? Do you know much about pregnancies?" The girl was as smart as a whip. Talking to her about this would be like talking to her own mother.

"Suppose so. I used to help mom out, plus I'm working with her in the medical bay everyday and they're kind of obsessed about reproducing here."

"Huh?" Katniss asked.

"I was helping mom out with one of the patients and we noticed that a lot of them had the same things on their records. Apparently they got stricken with some type of pox here that left the majority of them infertile. So they're constantly trying to find a way to protect those that are left with the capability of having kids. I'm not supposed to talk

about it though, the doctor in there is kind of strict. When mom and I asked about it, he told us to keep that information confidential."

"Hmmm..." Katniss filed that little tid bit of information away for a rainy day. She wasn't sure why, but she thought it might come in handy when and if Coin found out about Dr. Valero not aborting the baby.

"Hey, I thought you said you could keep a secret," Katniss teased her sister.

"Sure, if it's for someone I actually care about," Prim gave her a little grin. "That doctor's kind of a jerk to mom so I don't really care if everyone finds out about it, though I'm not sure that the people of Thirteen are in the dark or anything. I mean they've been living with it for years."

'Yup,' Katniss thought to herself, 'This is definitely something that will prove to work in my favor in the future. How I'm not sure yet, but I'll figure it out.' She and Prim spoke quietly about the side effects Katniss would be facing and what she could do to hide them. When Prim came up with a brilliant idea, Katniss gave her sister a kiss on the head. "Prim, I need to wake you up more often."

"I wish you would. Peeta used to talk to me all the time and he said I helped," Prim stated proudly.

"Peeta's one smart guy," Katniss said.

"Of course he is," Prim cuddled up against her, "he married you."

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Haymitch had studied Effie's note over and over again. There was something wrong about it and for the life of him he couldn't figure it out. 'What are you trying to tell me Trinkie?' He asked himself as he paced around his dimly lit quarters. The second he heard Beetee's announcement about the message coming over the broadcast system Haymitch had thought it was something from Effie, but he wasn't about to get his hopes up over the woman. He saw what Katniss and Finnick were going through and he'd be damned if he was going to get lumped in with the crazies because Effie was stuck in the Capitol. Nope. He put all personal feelings he had for the woman out of his mind and stuck to the business at hand, but damn it was a hard thing to do without the aid of alcohol. He had been fighting the shakes since he was at the Capitol and things kept getting worse for him. The problem was he didn't think his issues had anything to do with the booze that no longer flowed through his system as freely as the blood that pumped through his heart. He was almost ninety-nine percent sure the thing he was missing most had nothing to do with the alcohol that had been his security blanket for over two decades, but the woman that tried to free him from its addiction. "Damn it Trinkie!" Haymitch pounded at the small table next to his bed. "What are you trying to tell me?" He picked up the note and ripped into pieces, scattering the shreds in the air with a throw of his hand. He lay on his back, throwing his arm over his eyes for a few minutes, then picked up the pieces of paper and tried to put it back together so he could read it, but he was missing a few pieces. He'd have Plutarch print him up a new one, but they hated to waste resources in Thirteen and then it hit him. "Son of a bitch!" He didn't bother getting dressed, he just raced out of his room and headed down to the area that Beetee had been holed up in for over a week. None of the security guards bothered to

stop him, Haymitch was pretty sure they knew better, all he got was some pretty strange looks. "Where is he?" Haymitch bellowed when he entered the large underground facility designated for designing technology.

"Who..." a young lady monitoring the broadcasts from the Capitol stopped speaking and stared at the half naked man, clearing her voice before asking, "Mr. Abernathy who are you looking for?"

"You," he pointed at her. "This message." He slammed the bits of paper onto the small ledge of a desk in front of her. "Was this the whole thing that came through?"

"I'm sorry?" She asked him trying her best to keep her eyes focused on his face.

"This message that was sent to us from the Capitol. Is this how it was sent to us? Word for word?"

"Basically. We had to condense it in order to..."

"Son of a bitch!" Haymitch threw his hands in the air. "Where's the whole thing? I need to see it."

The girl pushed a few buttons and pulled it up on a computer screen. The note they had gotten was far from the message Effie had sent. They had eliminated over two thirds of it. "What the hell? Why would you people get rid of so much of the message?"

"It was useless information. Much of the message was repeated only using different words."

"This," Haymitch pointed to the screen, "I need this whole thing. Print it up."

"I'll have to get authorization to use the inks as well as the paper. We've already printed it on..."

"PRINT IT!" Haymitch screamed. The second he held it in his hands Haymitch could see it. It was the only code he knew. Granted the rebels stopped using it a long time ago, but Peeta had taught it to Effie and she had sent Haymitch mail using it the entire time they were apart taking advantage of the rebels antiquated code to nag him in print about his drinking, and keeping up to date on Katniss and Peeta until she started to date that blowhard Bettes. After that, Haymitch didn't hear from her again until Reaping Day, but prior to that, he actually looked forward to the letters she sent him. They never had anything of importance written down, but she'd always sneak in something about how she looked forward to seeing him in an upright position instead of face down in a pool of his own vomit or if it was a short note she'd simply say, stay sober. Seeing the embedded message from Effie wasn't as good as seeing the woman herself, but it felt pretty damn good. "That a girl, Effie! I knew it was from you!" Haymitch ripped the paper out of the girl's hand and planted a wet kiss on the young lady then turned to leave. Before walking out of the facility he paused, flashed the girl his cocky grin and said, "Don't get too excited over that sweetheart. That kiss wasn't meant for you. That was for Trinkie."

"Do you hear that?" Prim whispered to Katniss from her sleeping position on the bed. "Someone's banging on your door."

Katniss lulled her head back into the pillow and said, "It's Haymitch." She threw the covers off of herself and walked to her mother's front door, throwing it open in a huff. "There are people trying to sleep here Haymitch."

"Hey," he turned away from Katniss' front door and pulled her out of her mother's quarters. "We need to talk."

"Now? It's the middle of the night."

"Now sweetheart. Now," he grinned like the dickens.

"Wait there."

Haymitch stood in the hallway pacing back and forth for what seemed like an eternity, but was only a few minutes, staring at the Everdeen's door. When Katniss opened up her door instead the man was truly impressed. "Niiiiice. You found a way around this place without alerting the authorities. Your mentor taught you well."

"My mentor is a moron." She held the door open for him. "Come in before you get us both in trouble."

Haymitch walked into Katniss' quarters and took a look around. It was a far cry from what the girl had been living in for the past year, and there wasn't much room for one let alone two, but when he saw touches from their home in Twelve he hoped it would make Peeta's return easier for them. "Looks nice sweetheart. I like the spices on the shelf."

Katniss gave her shoulder a shrug. "Smells like him."

"How'd ya like to sniff the real thing?"

"That's sick, Haymitch," her face was deadpan.

"I mean Peeta. Guess what I've got."

"Knowing you, some form of contagion and I'd rather not know where you picked it up from, or should I say who?" She let out a little chuckle.

"Very funny." he handed her the message and said, "Got some paper and pencils around here? I know you do."

"Of course I do. What is this?" She picked up the piece of paper and walked to a loose tile in the floor, lifting it up to reveal a stash of hidden pencils. "Those are for Peeta. So he can sketch when he gets back."

Haymitch eyed up her loot appreciatively. "Don't blame ya for hording sweetheart, but make sure they don't find out about it."

"They won't as long as you're..." She narrowed her eyes in realization. "This is Effie's message. Why is this version so much longer than the one we looked at?"

"Because they hate to waste so they eliminated most of her text so it would fit on a smaller piece of paper and left us with the basics." Haymitch pulled out a chair. "There's a code in there."

"Yeah, I know. Peeta used to send me notes like this, but I sucked at reading them so..." Katniss took the pencil and found a piece of paper from underneath a drawer she had hidden there. "Have you brought this to anyone else?"

"Came straight here."

Katniss' eyes met Haymitch's. "Okay, let's see if we can figure this out."

He watched her as she worked on it, attempting to look over her shoulder but getting shooed away and wondered how she was holding up. He had meant to ask her on many different occasions but she kept zoning out and moving her lips, blah blah blahing about. Now he noticed how healthy she was looking. She had scars from the arena, but other than that, she looked really great. "Thirteen must agree with you."

"Well, I don't agree with it." She went back to work after her snide remark.

Haymitch went to her bed and kicked back on it, putting his hands under his head. "What I wouldn't give to have my own pillow."

Katniss shook her head at him. "What I wouldn't give to have my husband."

"Yeah, I know, but...you gotta admit...you miss your bed in Victor's Village."

"Not the bed as much as the man that slept beside me." Katniss paused then added, "But I do miss our bedding. If I had thought about it, I would've stopped in the woods and picked up some of that stuff Peeta put into storage for us while I was in Twelve."

"Wouldn't have done you any good. They brought it all here," Haymitch told her and saw Katniss' head snap up.

"What do you mean they brought it here? Where is it?"

"Don't know. Why?" He had to wonder what was in storage that was so important to her.

"There are two trunks that have voice activated locks. They belong to me and Peeta. I want them." Katniss glared at him.

Haymitch held his hands up and said, "Don't talk to me. Talk to Coin. She probably had someone break the thing open and put everything in their stockpile."

Katniss slammed her pencil down. "She better not have or so help me..." her nostrils were flaring. "I'm adding that onto my list." She grabbed another piece of paper from the drawer and started writing, only this time in pen.

"What list?"

"Nothing," she snapped. "You'll find out tomorrow."

Haymitch just nodded his head and waited for her to get impatient and spill her guts. When she didn't he continued to pry. "What's happening tomorrow?"

"Do you want me to do this or did you just come here for a midnight chat?" She slammed the pencil against the table. "Because I don't have to figure this out for you."

"It's not for me sweetheart, it's for you."

"Me?" Katniss looked down at the paper and called him over. "Come here. Start putting these words together and making sense out of it."

It took them about a half an hour to figure it out, but when they did they both sat there staring at it, unmoving with concern filling their eyes until Haymitch broke the uncomfortable silence. "We've got to figure out a way to get them out of there. She's going to get herself

killed doing this." He felt the shakes coming on again and lifted his fists to his clamped lips. "There's no way she can keep this up."

"They're killing him," Katniss' eyes were filled with tears. "Haymitch, how quickly can they plan something?"

"Don't know," Haymitch's worst fears were coming to life, "but they better get it done and fast, or we won't have anyone left to rescue."

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"Hey," Katniss had her list of demands in her pocket, was dressed according to Thirteen's standards and was almost ready to face the woman she hated as much as President Snow. She tried to get past Coin's order to abort her baby, but that wasn't something a person like Katniss swept under a rug and forgave. She greeted Gale in the dining hall. "Want to sit next to me this morning?"

Gale's boyish grin met her worried scowl. "I don't date married women." He was pleased when he saw the crack of a smile. "Yeah, grab your tray."

Katniss stuck her arm into the device that read aloud her information before every meal and noticed it was still calling her by her maiden name. "I am so sick of this crap."

"What crap?" Gale asked.

"My name is Mellark. You think somebody around here could get that right?" She blew the few strands of hair that had fallen into her eyes away.

"To be fair, you two only had a toasting." Gale said to her and Katniss filled with guilt. She had assumed that someone had told him about the actual wedding ceremony between her and Peeta, but now she knew no one did. Gale placed his tray down to get his daily pathetic servings. "I'll tell you what I'm sick of, this food. They need some decent game around here." He looked down at Katniss who was chewing at her lip like it was her last meal. "Catnip, you're getting more food than me and Rory combined so quit eating your own mouth. It's not very attractive."

"Hmm? Oh," she chuckled a little and ran through more things in her head. "Yeah, sorry about that. Nervous habit."

"Really?" Gale had reached to carry her tray for her than thought better of it. "Here I thought you just wanted a snack before breakfast."

'Snack before breakfast,' she thought to herself, 'I hope Prim's plan works and Regina doesn't get mad at me for letting her in on the baby.'

"Hello?" Gale waved his hand in front of her face. "You having breakfast with Peeta this morning?" It wouldn't have bothered him if she was, but he was hoping she'd join him for the meal.

"No. I'm just trying to figure out what I can put on my list of demands before going into the command center." Katniss took out her piece of paper and pen. "Want to help me with it?"

Gale read it over and gave her a slow nod. "Good thinking with the first one, but the second?" He twisted his face a little. "Seriously?"

"Yes," Katniss was firm in her thinking. She waited until Haymitch left her quarters before working on the list some more. She had thought about confiding in him about her choice to become the Mockingjay then decided against it. The man was still too involved with the rebels and right now she wasn't sure who was trustworthy and who wasn't, but she'd have more of an idea after the meeting this morning.

"Number two is important to number one. Trust me on this. Peeta couldn't live without number two."

"Okay," Gale slid the paper across the table at her and spooned the last of his mashed turnips into his mouth. "We could ask them, to let us hunt."

Katniss' eyes lit up before she started to scribble it down. "That's a good one...and Buttercup. I better put him on here too or he might wind up being served to us tomorrow."

"Yeah, I don't think these people will look too kindly on a useless cat roaming around," Gale agreed.

"Anything else?" She looked over the list and it seemed so paltry in comparison to what she was going to do for Coin.

"Depends on how petty you want to be, I suppose." Gale tapped at the end of the table. "Seems to me you got the important things on there." He gave her a sheepish grin, "Is there anything not so important you want?"

"Yeah, but I'll talk to Coin privately about that." Katniss picked up her empty tray and walked it to the washing area. What she wouldn't do to have Peeta by her side this morning. 'If he were here you wouldn't have to go through this,' she reminded herself. "Hey," she had a thought, "Don't suppose you want to come with me to the command

center? They might punish you though...for not following your schedule."

"They already took my communicuff. What more can they take?"
Gale's eyes danced with humor.

"Thanks." They walked together to the room where everybody who was anybody was waiting inside for her. "Wait a second," she said quietly to Gale before he opened the door. "I need a minute."

"You okay, Catnip?" Gale asked her.

It was a simple question, one she could have answered with a fine or yeah, but that's not what came out. What came out...*poured* out was her heart. Gale had no clue if Katniss knew she was actually speaking out loud or not, but she was and he heard every word. "I never asked for this you know...to love someone this way, but I do and now... I don't know what happened to me. Who I am anymore without you." Gale listened to her, but he knew she wasn't talking to him. It was Peeta she was conversing with. It was always him.

"When did this happen to me? When did you become such a vital part of my life? When *weren't* you a vital part of my life?" Katniss let out a little sound somewhere between a laugh and a burst of air thinking of all the times that Peeta impacted her world without her even knowing. "You keep telling me I've changed...the Games changed me, but it wasn't the Games, it was you." She closed her eyes and pictured Peeta sitting under the oak tree, smiling at her with his perfectly straight teeth, pictured the shape of his lips, the way his hair fell across his forehead and his eyes...the way they looked at her like she was the only person that ever existed. "How did you see me? See what was inside of me when I couldn't even see it myself? How did you find more in me than anyone that ever knew me? Please tell me you can find more in me now. That I'm not going to lose my courage

and I'll be able to face this on my own. We've done this together for so long now I'm not sure how to do it alone. God, I don't want to be without you anymore. I need to be that girl you fell in love with again. I have to be the girl that volunteered for her sister during the first Games, and I'm scared...so scared, because I don't know where she is. I need to be the girl that I was in the first arena...the one that didn't think twice before lifting up a handful of berries to her lips. Please...*please*," she begged him, "come to me now. Just let me feel you near so I can do this."

Peeta's voice spoke quietly in her head, "*One*," she could almost feel his hand trailing down her braid.

Gale watched her as a tear rolled down her cheek then she moved her lips and no sound came out.

"Two," she held her hand out and felt Peeta's heart beating beneath her palm.

"Three," her hand went to her abdomen where the third member of their family was currently residing. She could feel the warmth of Peeta's hand pressing against her...his lips touching hers. "Thank you," she swallowed the huge lump in her throat then turned to Gale, "Okay," she said aloud. "Let's do this."

"One second," he reached out and wiped the tear away. He wasn't sure if he should say anything or not, she seemed to need support of some kind, but the look in her eyes said she had found all she needed from her little talk. Catnip didn't need him to fill that particular void in her life anymore and he had to figure out what his new role in her world would be. "Okay. Let's go."

They walked into the middle of a debate of some sort. Katniss noticed Haymitch looking exceptionally pissed off and Plutarch's red face. "Am I late?"

"No," President Coin's eyes flashed towards Gale and back to Katniss. "Sit down."

"That's okay, I'll stand." Katniss answered stiffly.

"Do the words orange blossom mean anything to you?" Coin came right out and asked.

Katniss shook her head, "No. Should they?"

"Seems that's the code name of a traitor," Haymitch answered. "We've been trying to figure it out since I decoded Effie's message." Katniss had already known that, *she* was the one that showed it to Haymitch after breaking Effie's code. If he hadn't told these people she already knew about it, then there was a reason for it and she knew she had to play along.

"A traitor in the rebellion?" Katniss appeared to be dumbfounded.

"You see," Plutarch took up a position next to Katniss, "We've gotten word that there's some problems at the Capitol. It seems there is a traitor in our midst." Plutarch lifted his eyes to Haymitch. "You are aware that Flavius has a relative married to an official, am I correct?"

Katniss pushed a few strands of hair behind her ear, "Yeah. Peeta mentioned it. Why?"

"The person providing information to the Capitol was never able to fully infiltrate our rebellion...had to keep his...or her distance for some reason. We thought perhaps the term orange blossom might have to

do with a physical trait." Plutarch tapped at a notebook. "Katniss, we are wondering how much information you and Peeta gave to Flavius while at the Capitol."

She had no clue why they were talking about her prep team. "He did my hair and makeup. He could barely even get through that before the Quell without crying. Why?" She asked again through narrowing eyes.

"He's got those bright orange curls," Haymitch said. "I think it's ridiculous, but these guys..." he made a gesture with his finger pointing recklessly at the people in the room.

"Because he has *orange hair*?" Katniss was finally catching up.

"Orange blossom...orange hair. Are you people stupid? That could mean anything! Do you know how freakish those Capitol people are," she stared at Plutarch with his strange hairstyle and even weirder mustache. "They all have some type of physical alteration done to them. That can mean anything. A flower tattooed on their body like..." She looked around the room and saw a woman with a clematis tattooed up her arm as though it was a trellis, "like her! Look at those flowers! How do you know she's not orange blossom? Or him?"

Katniss turned to the man standing next to the flowered woman with a swirl of colors in his hair, "Tell me there's no orange in there!" She whirled around in her chair, "There isn't one person from the Capitol you can't apply that code name to if you're going off of physical traits with the exception of maybe Cinna, who's dead and Effie, who sent the damn message!"

Haymitch threw his hands up in the air and said, "See! I'm not the only one! We're jumping the gun here...doing exactly what they want us to do...looking at each other with accusation in our eyes. We need more information before coming to any conclusions."

"What else did the message say?" Katniss asked.

"Nothing of importance," Coin said before anyone else could answer, but Katniss knew this wasn't the truth.

Effie had said that Peeta's life was in danger, that the original message was a fake and that there was a traitor in the rebellion, but Katniss had no clue where the name orange blossom came from so she asked. "Where did you get the name orange blossom from anyway?"

"We overheard it before Effie's computer died during their meeting at the Capitol," Haymitch spoke up.

"You can hear them?" Katniss leaned against the table so she wouldn't fall.

"Only when Effie turns her computer on, but we haven't heard from her since. Which leads us to believe there's no news or..." Plutarch let his sentence trail off as his face explained.

"Or she's been found out." Katniss stated and hoped with all her might that the woman Peeta adored more than anything in the world was still safe from harm.

Coin quirked her brow. "That's not why you're here though, is it?" She addressed Katniss. "You've made your decision?"

"Yeah, so this is the deal..." Katniss took a deep breath and held Coin's steady gaze, "...I'll be your Mockingjay." The room exploded with cheers with a few exceptions...Coin, who Katniss decided was too composed or dead inside to show any emotions, Finnick who was too caught up in his *own* emotions, Haymitch who was waiting for the conditions he knew were coming and Justus who knew the dangers of her taking up the position. "But I have a few stipulations." Katniss pulled out her list and flattened it out on the table, again she gave it a

once over, thinking it was too small, that something was missing. Shouldn't she be thinking on a grander scale, asking for something for the future when she was powerless? She looked up at the woman running the show...that placed the order to abort her child, thought of the man that sent her into the arena and it came to her. She wrote it out in big bold letters across the bottom, *I KILL THE PRESIDENT*. She decided to start reading the list with what she deemed the smallest, most unimportant of requests. "First, my family gets to keep their cat." If the reaction she got to this request was a hint as to what was coming, the rest of the list was going to be a nightmare.

"I see no problems with that," Plutarch was fine with it as was his posse of staff from the Capitol.

"Absolutely not!" Coin hollered. "We have limited resources here and I won't waste it on an animal."

The debate that followed was ridiculous until finally it was agreed that Buttercup could stay but Katniss' family would have to be moved to the top level, which meant the Mellarks had to move too which led to another debate because the quarters there had an eight inch window above ground. Finally everyone agreed to it and Buttercup could come and go as he pleased, but he had to feed himself. If he missed curfew, he was locked out and if he caused a security problem, he'd be shot, though Katniss was still pretty sure they'd put him in some sort of stew instead. Since that was pretty much his life in Twelve, with the exception of the shooting, it sounded fine to Katniss. "Next," she said, "I want to hunt with Gale. Out in the woods." There was dead silence in the room.

"We won't go far," Gale added. "We can use our own bows and you can have the meat for the kitchen."

"I can't breathe in here!" Katniss exploded without meaning to. "Sorry, but..." she let out a breath. "Being shut up in here..." Peeta's words came to her. "Some people need food to eat, but I need nature. It feeds my soul. I'd get better a lot quicker if I could hunt." Katniss could see the glint of pride in Haymitch's eyes and wondered if he heard Peeta in her explanation.

"Katniss, I'm sure it would speed up your recovery, but leaving you out in the open that way would be a very large security risk," Plutarch said with sorrow in his voice. "Personally I'm against the idea of you being able to walk freely through the woods..."

"No," Coin interrupted him. "Let them. You can have two hours a day deducted from your education time. You'll have a quarter mile radius with communication units and tracker anklets. What's next?"

Katniss looked up at Gale and was grateful they had gotten this. He wasn't on the list, but he should've been. She should have asked for something for Gale. "Gale," Katniss said. "I'll need him with me to do this." 'At least till Peeta gets here,' she thought to herself.

"With you how?" Coin asked. "Off camera? By your side at all times?" She rambled her questions on and on without giving Katniss a chance to even think of an answer. "Do you want him presented as your new lover?"

Katniss shook her head in disbelief as Plutarch responded to Coin. "I think we should continue with the current romance. A quick defection from Peeta could cause the audience to lose sympathy for her. Especially since they think she's still pregnant with his child."

"Agreed." Coin gave her head a nod. "So, on-screen, Gale can simply be portrayed as a fellow rebel and..."

"Stop it." Katniss was trying to get a hold of the anger that was bubbling up deep within her. "Stop it!"

"You didn't want us to go *public* with your romance, did you?" Coin asked.

"Wha...What is wrong with you people?!" Katniss screamed at them. "Gale is not my new lover...my old lover or anything of the sort. I am married! MARRIED!" She ran her now trembling hands over her head. "Let's get one thing straight right now, Gale is not my cousin, he's not my lover...my boyfriend...my...anything! Gale is my friend. FRIEND! We have never and never will be anything more than friends." Katniss looked around the room. "Is everyone clear on that?" Mumbles and head nod in agreements were given. "Good. I would like Gale to be by my side as my friend. A person of support. That is it." Katniss addressed Coin, "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Fair enough," Coin's face was rigid.

"Good," Katniss snapped. "Next on my list is very simple. If one more person...computer...machine or anything calls me Everdeen again you can take your Mockingjay position and shove it up your asses. My name is Mellark. Katniss Mellark. Peeta Mellark and I were legally married by the mayor of District Twelve two days before the reading of the card." There were gasps, looks of shock, smiles and one of disappointment on Gale's face, all around the room. "If you don't believe me, ask Haymitch. He was there as well as Peeta's father, my mother...my sister...the mayor himself and his daughter, Madge. So, are we all clear?" She looked around the room and took in the nods. "Great. What's my name?" A few mumbled Mellarks filtered out. Katniss let out a crazed type of laugh and said, "No, you people don't seem to get it. I want to hear it loud and clear. Say my name!"

"Katniss Mellark," rippled through the room at various intervals.

Katniss stared at Coin who didn't say a thing. "President Coin?" There was silence in the control room. Even the sniveling Finnick took a pause from grieving to watch. Katniss noticed Plutarch's look of approval as well as a woman next to him.

"What's next...Mrs. Mellark?" Coin said through glaring eyes and a tight jaw.

"Next is rescuing my husband from the Capitol," Katniss said firmly. "Rescuing all of the rebels from the Capitol." She thought of number two on her list, the one Gale had questioned and said, "Including...*especially*, Effie Trinket." Haymitch's eyes flashed to hers with excitement.

"No. Your husband," Coin said it as though it disgusted her, "dedicated much of his time with Caesar Flickerman denouncing the war and all of our beliefs. He has committed treason. As far as the rest of the rebels, including Effie Trinket, they knew what they were signing up for when they joined. Their sacrifice will be remembered."

Katniss had been afraid of this when Gale said he hadn't heard Peeta's message to her, but she was prepared for such a thing. "Sorry. Not good enough. When the war is over, if we've won, Peeta will be pardoned. No form of punishment will be inflicted on him or the others that have been captured." She hadn't written their names down, but just in case, she thought she had better cover her bases. "Johanna...Enobaria...or anyone else for that matter that was captured during your botched rescue attempt."

"No," Coin's voice was completely flat and unemotional.

"Yes!" Katniss shot back at her. "It's not their fault you abandoned them. Who knows what the Capitol is doing to them? And Effie! That woman has done nothing but help you people and you're willing to just

toss her away like she's yesterday's trash?" She scanned the room taking in the expressions of the rebels she thought she could trust before the escape, trying to determine who agreed with her and who agreed with the president. Much to Katniss' surprise, the majority appeared to be on her side, including some from District Thirteen that looked to the ground, as if shamed, when the president responded to Katniss.

"They'll be tried with the other war criminals and treated as tribunal sees fit," Coin kept her cool.

Katniss didn't. "They'll be granted immunity!" Peeta's girl was on fire again and it felt pretty good to Katniss. "You will personally pledge this in front of the entire population of District Thirteen and the remainder of Twelve. Today!" She held up her piece of paper which had it outlined in writing. "It will be recorded for future generations. You will hold yourself and your government responsible for their safety, or you'll find yourself another Mockingjay!"

Fulvia, Plutarch's assistant, practically jumped out of her seat and said, "That's her! Can't you see it? Smoke...sounds of gunfire in the background...with the costume..."

Plutarch's eyes were all aglow as he said under his breath, "Yes. That's exactly what we need."

Katniss could hear them, but ignored them. She was too busy having a staring contest with President Coin. There was no way in hell she was going to let the woman win. There were still a few other things she needed, but she needed this first and she needed Coin to agree to it publicly.

"Seems to me the girl here is making a good point," Haymitch said quietly. "Sounds like a fair offer to me."

"All right," Coin's eyes twitched slightly at the corners, "but you had better perform."

"I'll do what I need to when you make the announcement," Katniss countered.

Coin turned and spoke to a few people Katniss didn't recognize, "Call a national security assembly during Reflection today and I'll make the announcement then." She turned back and said, "Is there anything else on your list, Katniss?"

"Yeah, a couple of things I need to discuss with you in private, but this one..." Katniss lifted the corner of her mouth in a grin and said to the room, "I get to kill the president." She was treated to a round of applause and the first sign of actual emotion from Coin.

"That one I will agree to without argument." Coin gestured with her arm towards a corner of her room, "Shall we go over your private demands or do you require more solitude?"

"No that's fine." Katniss followed her into a corner of the room while the rest of the rebels gathered around Plutarch.

"What is it that I can do for you, Katniss?" Coin asked her.

"Where are my trunks?" Katniss wondered if the woman had found a way to get into the locks and was using the items Peeta had packed away for her. "The ones you brought back here from Twelve?"

"Everything we brought back from Twelve is currently in storage. We are going through each box and putting the items to good use."

"I want my trunks." Katniss held up her hand to stop the president's comments before they even started. "The stuff inside belongs to me

and Peeta, and I want it all back. Including the items inside of the box marked with my name on it." There was a down blanket and a certain piece of lingerie in there Katniss didn't want anyone to know about which is why she asked for it in private, not to mention it was kind of on the shallow side to be demanding such personal items. "I don't want any arguments about this. It means a lot to me and I want it all back...immediately."

Coin gave her head a nod and said, "I'll have them brought to your new quarters. What's next."

"As you know I have some additional nutritional needs due to a form of blood disease I developed after losing so much of it in the arena. It's been determined that I have anemia which hasn't been heard of since before the dark days and there is no cure for it." It was what Prim had come up with the night before. It was a form of blood disease that existed hundreds of years earlier that required specific nutrients to the blood, but no one knew what because it was no longer on record. The only reason she knew about it was because she had come across it in one of the books that was sent to Peeta by Effie Trinket from the Capitol and the chances of someone from District Thirteen knowing about that were slim to none, but Dr. Valero would be the perfect person to help in this ruse. Earlier in the morning, Prim went to the medical bay before her shift started and met with the doctor in private so she could update Katniss' medical records. Prim was thrilled when she made it back to their quarters before breakfast and said that Dr. Valero wanted to move her and their mother to her service in the medical bay. "It causes a person to become weak and listless. The severity of mine can be a bit...precarious at times. I will need...provisions in my quarters." Katniss saw the confused look on the president's face. "I need to snack throughout the day," she dumbed her request down, "and I don't think it would be fair or smart to do it in front of the rest of the residents here. My father in law works

in the kitchen. He can provide me with some baked goods...a few vegetables that are high in nutrients...as I said, anemia hasn't been around for hundreds of years. As far as we know, I am currently the only known case in existence and we don't know much about it. I don't know about you, but I don't think it would be too wise letting the others in on this. The last thing we need is a weak Mockingjay."

Coin gave her an approving look. "No, I don't think it would be wise to bring them in on this. I can agree to let you keep some things in your quarters as long as you don't abuse it and feed your entire family or that cat. It must only be what you need for the day."

"Agreed." Katniss was thrilled. She now had a way of getting by when her morning sickness medication was gone. She could eat, puke and then have her regular meal.

"Is that it?"

"Once Peeta is back, if my...*illness* gets out of hand and he's able to fill the role of Jabberjay, I can step down. No questions asked."

"Katniss, your husband has spoken out against the war, I don't believe he'll ever be able to fill the role as Jabberjay, but yes...if for some reason he is able to...I see no reason why you would have to continue your position. I would hate to put your life in danger," Coin said flatly.

"Oh, I'm sure you're only interested in my well being." Katniss scribbled it down on her piece of paper before handing Coin the pen. "Sign this saying you agree to all of my terms."

Coin read it over including the parts that Katniss added and signed it. "I see no problems with any of this as long as you keep your end of the bargain."

"Oh, I'll keep my end of the deal. Don't worry about that." It took all of Katniss' strength not to punch the woman. She began walking towards the group that surrounded Plutarch. "So, is anyone here interested in the secret message I got from my Jabberjay?" She took a seat next to Plutarch and lounged back in her chair. The hush that fell over the room brought a satisfactory grin to Katniss' face. She could've told them earlier and avoided the entire argument over the rescuing of the rebels, but she needed to see who was on her side and who was with Coin. "Peeta may have said some harsh words for all to hear over the air, but he spoke to me and none of you had a clue, which means, Snow didn't know either."

Looks were exchanged, questions asked until finally Haymitch spoke up. "You gonna explain yourself sweetheart or you gonna make us sit here with our mouths hanging open all day?"

"Is there any way to pull up the interview with Peeta again?" Katniss asked.

Plutarch pushed a few buttons on his portable computer and then the large television screen showed Peeta and Caesar's images. "Where would you like me to start, Katniss?" Plutarch asked.

She wanted to sit there and stare at him...just look at Peeta, but she couldn't. She had to make sure not to get unnerved by the mere sight of him and keep up her strength. "Wherever you want."

"Why don't we watch how he denounces the war we've been fighting so hard to win?" Coin said with spite in her voice.

"Sure," Katniss had no problems with that. 'Then you can choke on your words,' she wanted to spit out in Coin's face.

"This is as close as I can get it," Plutarch said as he pressed a few buttons.

"What about Haymitch Abernathy?" Caesar asked Peeta.

"I don't know what Haymitch knew," Peeta's face was hard as stone when he answered. "If he was part of some rebel conspiracy, he never mentioned it to me."

"What does your heart tell you?" Caesar asked him.

"That I shouldn't have trusted him." Peeta answered. Katniss looked across the room at Haymitch whose eyes dropped from the screen.

"We can stop now if you'd like," Caesar patted Peeta on the arm.

"Did you have something else on your mind, Caesar?" Peeta asked, almost leading the host on.

"I was going to ask your thoughts on the war, but if you're too upset..."

Peeta looked straight into the camera, "Oh, no. I'm not too upset to answer that. I'd be more than happy to give you my opinions on the war." He took a deep breath. "I want everyone watching, whether you're on the Capitol or the rebel's side to stop and think about what this is going to mean for us as human beings. We almost went extinct fighting ourselves before and now there's even fewer of us." Peeta gripped the end of his seat, "Is that what we want to do...kill ourselves off completely until there's nothing left of us but some smoldering remains?"

Caesar tried to ask a question, "I don't understand..."

"We cannot continue to fight one another!" Peeta's voice grew louder. "We must stop this right now!"

"Am I to understand that you're calling for a cease fire?" Caesar appeared to be in shock.

Peeta faced Caesar, "That's exactly what I'm doing," then turned back to the camera, "and Katniss... I don't know where you are or what your role is in all of this, but..." he hung his head down then lifted it up, "Read my lips. You know what you have to do." He lowered his voice down. "Think of our baby Katniss. Think of our child and what kind of future it'll have if...if this goes on." His lips barely moved. "Now Why don't we ask the g..."

"There!" Katniss pointed to the screen and yelled out. "Rewind it!"

"To where?" Plutarch asked while the rest of the room spoke over him in wonder.

"Right after he talks about the baby's future, but before he asks to go to his room," Katniss answered.

Plutarch rewound the feed. "...it'll have if...if this goes on."

"STOP!" Katniss yelled and turned to Plutarch. "Do you have a way of slowing this down?"

"Yes," he moved his fingers over a few buttons then Peeta's face appeared.

Everyone watched as Peeta's lips moved, but no one could make out what he was saying except for Katniss and Justus who turned to her and lifted his fingers counting out to her.

Katniss' hands clapped over her cheeks thrilled that someone had finally understood. "Yes," she was almost in tears. "That's right," she said to him.

"What's right?" Gale asked. "I don't get it, Catnip. What did Peeta say?"

"He said, One. Two. Three," Katniss turned to Gale with a smile. "One, two, three!" She repeated it as though everyone in the room should have just understood, but they all looked at her as though her mentally disorientated bracelet was accurate. She let out a huge breath.

"Plutarch, can you get video of mine and Peeta's Games on that thing?" She pointed to his computer.

"Which one?"

"The berries...I need to see the time right before Peeta and I were going to eat the berries. Can you access that?" Katniss hoped so, because it was the only way she could prove Peeta's innocence.

"It was a pivotal part in the rebellion. Of course I have that on here," Plutarch pulled it up.

"Play it," Katniss smiled. "I want everyone to watch me and Peeta carefully right before we lift those berries to our lips. More importantly, listen to what we say."

The image of Katniss and Peeta standing toe to toe, a lifetime ago, filled the control room. In the palms of their hands they each held enough nightlock to kill them within seconds of it hitting their stomachs.

Peeta's voice was quiet when he asked Katniss, "On three?"

Several gasps were heard in the control room along with Haymitch's soft, "Son of a bitch."

Everyone could see them mouth the words I love you to one another right before they followed their ritual of a hand being pressed against a heart, another was trailed down some hair and they counted to three. Katniss was so grateful they actually spoke the words that day. "Thank you, Plutarch." She looked around the room before saying, "It started that day...that moment," she pointed to the screen. "Peeta and I may have gotten married in District Twelve over six months later, but we became of one mind right there in front of the whole world. Peeta's message to me during his interview with Caesar was loud and clear. 'Read my lips.' Our way of saying we love each other while the cameras are on us. He asked me to think of our child's future." Katniss pointed to the screen showing a frozen picture of her and Peeta in the arena holding the berries up to their lips. "That's our child's future. Fighting for its life in the arena at the age of twelve. 'One, two, three.' Our way of saying that we are two people of one mind. That we will face whatever stands in our way together no matter what it costs us." Katniss' eyes lit up. "Peeta Mellark is not a traitor. He is not guilty of treason," she turned and faced Coin head on, "he is the Jabberjay and has been filling his role without question since before this war began."

Haymitch said loud enough for all to hear, "And that ladies and gentlemen, is your Mockingjay."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 5: Friend or Foe?, a

hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Four: Friend or Foe?

Katniss has agreed to be the Mockingjay until Peeta gets rescued, but her terms came with a list of stipulations. Gale and Katniss have finally worked through some issues...or so they thought. Peeta's hijacking is causing major damage to him, but Snow's not thrilled with the results. And Effie's personal security guard has been making things very difficult for her to accomplish things for the rebellion.

Thank you one and all for reading and for reviewing. Your comments are quite uplifting. Thank you S and A for all your help. You're both amazing. Want to get a sneak peek into the next chapter? follow me on tumblr. jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com.

Let's see what's going on with our little gang during...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

There were too many disturbing images plaguing Peeta's thoughts, all brought on by the Capitol. He was told about the death of his family. His parents and brother's horrific end, yet Peeta couldn't bring himself

to believe the things Snow was telling him no matter what he said about Katniss in regards to her being the reason for the firebombs. Still he played along knowing that he had no choice or Effie would be found out. Their relationship, which Snow thought was a ruse on her part, would be brought to light and that was something Peeta couldn't risk. The woman had already put herself in enough danger and he wasn't going to further endanger her life, so he screamed when he felt it was appropriate, yelled out vicious names when they spoke of Katniss and then things were brought back to Gale. Peeta didn't have to fake anything when it came to Gale. He hated the man with every ounce of his being. If it were up to Peeta, he'd kill Gale not Katniss, like Snow wanted him to.

"You see, Peeta? See all that she's done?" Snow paced slowly around the room as the drip slowly made its way into his vein. "She killed your family...your friends and led you to believe you were the father of her child when it's *his* child she's carrying." Snow pointed to an image of Gale and Katniss laying side by side next to each other on a beach, but there was something off about it. Katniss was wearing next to nothing and her skin looked as though it had been damaged. She was covered in scabs and had some kind of paste on them. Gale on the other hand was fully dressed and his flesh looked healthy. His skin had an almost rosy hue to it, like he was cold which was odd considering they were on a hot beach, but the strangest thing was the glow. Gale was illuminated by a green and gold shimmering light. "Katniss deserves to die for all that she's put you through."

Peeta wasn't fully aware of who Katniss was at that moment. He had no clue what she meant to him, but he knew her name and that he was married to her and she was carrying a baby. Whose baby he still didn't know. The thing he did know was that he had very strong feelings for her. Love? Hate? A combination of both? The guy lying next to her on the beach, Peeta despised. He directed all of the hatred

he felt for Gale towards Katniss hoping to appease President Snow. "If I had a knife I'd slit her throat." Saying the words out loud felt wrong, even if he was thinking about Gale. A tiny voice in the back of his mind was screaming at him, 'No! You don't want to do this! Gale is your friend! Fight this! Fight this!'

"President Snow?" The doctor in charge of administering the medication to Peeta spoke. "If we continue administering the drug today, we'll be in danger of damaging his permanent memory function."

Snow faced the doctor with hatred dripping from his voice, "You told me we would be able to turn him against her! Why is this taking so long?"

Peeta had to fight the smile...the laughter that was bubbling deep within him. 'Why?' He thought to himself, 'Because Effie Trinket loves me. That's why.'

"Sir, we've only hijacked a handful of prisoners in the past and never in the manor we are trying with this prisoner. Targeting specific memories and altering them takes careful precision. One mistake and he's useless. His entire past can be wiped out...brain damage...the results could be disastrous."

Snow walked slowly up to Peeta, leaned over him, placing his swollen lips close to his ear and spoke, "You're not making this very easy on me, Mr. Mellark. What do you say, I make things a little more difficult for you as well...hmm?" Snow stood upright and dabbed at the corners of his mouth. "Release him," he barked towards two of his elite guards. "Take him in for questioning."

Questioning, Peeta knew, was another way of saying, he was going to be beaten. His head lulled back and forth as the Peacekeepers

dragged his body across the floor into a room Peeta had never seen before. Effie had "taken him in for questioning" before, but her questions were asked in a private suite and at the end Peeta would get a few punches, kicks...some form of abuse from a Peacekeeper, but this room was a far cry from the suite Effie had used and Peeta was sure that Snow's questions would be much more painful than Effie's ever were. The metal walls held all sorts of torturous devices on them. Rings hung down from the ceiling. Why? Peeta had no clue and wasn't too eager to find out. A wide assortment of weapons were displayed along several different walls. Whips, a bamboo cane, a pole with metal prongs sticking out of it and blades...the different types of blades would have made any tribute long to grab hold of one to fight for their life. Peeta eyed up the room, took in how many guards he was left with, their build...height...weight... One favored his right hand, the other his left. The third guard's walk reminded him of Marvel's. Cocky and self-righteous. Peeta began looking at the three men in the room with him as fellow tributes trying to put an end to his life. 'That's what they are,' he told himself. 'They're tributes. Put in this tiny arena to hurt me and Katniss and now you need to fight them, Peeta. You need to fight to stay alive, so you can make sure Katniss survives.' He couldn't explain the overwhelming desire he had to protect Katniss, but it was there and he knew he had to follow his gut. There was talking going on around him. Snow was giving the men orders as to what he wanted done with Peeta. 'They're going to tie you up to those rings hanging from the ceiling,' a mental plan was forming, 'and once they do, you'll be helpless.' One of his arms was released as the other was lifted towards the dangling metal ring and Peeta knew that was his only chance. With his free hand he quickly reached around the throat of the Peacekeeper that was about to secure him in place, taking the man off guard and putting him in a headlock. Peeta stepped backwards towards the wall of blades throwing a quick look over his shoulder as he reached for one. Now that both arms were free...Peeta

was free, all hell broke loose. President Snow rushed to the door that they had entered through, yelling for the guards to regain control of Peeta. The two Peacekeepers that were heading towards some of the other weapons began to race in Peeta's direction as he grabbed a knife with a long blade off of the wall and slit the throat of the Peacekeeper in his grasp, freeing up his other hand. "Come on!" He yelled to them as he reached blindly behind him for another knife, now both hands were prepared for battle.

"SHOOT HIM!" Snow called out through the now open doorway.

But Peeta was too quick with his newly repaired fingers, thanks to the Capitol. He threw one of the knives, the metal blade a shiny blur as it whipped through the air, burying itself directly in the Peacekeeper's eye. The guard's gun never made it out of its holster. The other fumbled at something on the weapon as Peeta dove for the man's legs, taking him down to the ground then plunging the blade deep into his back. The gun, trapped beneath his lifeless body. Peeta's eyes honed in on his next target. The man that caused all of this. "SNOW!" The door to the torture chamber slammed closed as Peeta raced for it...pounded on it, calling out threats over and over again. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" He knew there was only a matter of seconds before Peacekeepers would be entering and either killing him or beating him to a bloody pulp. He took a quick scan of his surroundings and grabbed the gun out of the Peacekeeper's holster, took hold of as many blades as he could so he could pick off the guards one by one as they entered the room and turned a table over, using it for cover. He waited, his heart was racing in anticipation, his blood pumping through his veins and then the door flew open, but there was only one Peacekeeper standing in the doorway. Peeta began to violently shake at the vision before him. "Okay," he said quietly before dropping his weapons to the ground, lifting his hands in the air and surrendering himself. "Okay...just put the knife down. Don't...don't hurt her." Effie

Trinket stood at the white uniformed guard's mercy, a knife to her throat and terror filling her eyes.

The first fist that hit Peeta in the stomach took the breath from him. His eyes were stuck on Effie's trembling body, listening to her soft gasps. "May I...may I please be excused?"

The sound of President Snow's anger mixed with a conniving laugh was the last thing he heard before the fists began to pummel him. "Take her away."

"Come on, Peeta. Wake up," Johanna was pleading with him. He could sense there was something wrong with her. Johanna never sounded scared.

"Jo...Johanna?" Peeta opened his eyes and saw all the prisoner's stares focused on him. "You okay? Did they hurt you?"

"Christ! You scared the shit out of me!" She yelled at him.

"What did I do?" Peeta honestly didn't know what.

"I get back from my daily...bathing ritual to find you just lying there. You haven't moved since they brought you back." Johanna ran her hands back and forth over her tufts of brown hair. "Geez, I thought you were dead."

"Feels like death warmed over," Peeta gave her a pathetic grin, touched the tip of his tongue to a crack in his lip and tasted blood. "What..." he tried to remember what had happened. "Effie! Where's Effie?"

"Effie?!" Johanna began pacing back and forth in her cell. "I'm thinking you're on the brink of death and you wake up worried about Effie freaking Trinket? Priceless."

Peeta ran a swollen hand over a lump on his head. "They had her...a Peacekeeper had her by the throat."

Johanna stopped pacing briefly. "Yeah...well...she's one of *them*, so don't worry about her. I'm sure she's fine. Probably soaking in a tub or eating some fancy grub right about now." After a few deep breaths the woman took a seat on the floor close to his cell. "What happened in there today? Why'd they beat you so badly?"

"Guess I pissed them off." Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a little grin. "Snow wasn't too thrilled with me fighting back. Took down three of his precious Peacekeepers."

Johanna let out a burst of laughter. "You're kidding me? You?" She reached through the bars and gave him a small rap on the shoulder. "Prince Cinnamon Buns lives."

It was hard for him not to be happy about killing the Peacekeepers considering he didn't know what they did to Effie afterward, not to mention everything Snow told him beforehand. "They tried to convince me that Katniss was responsible for the bombing of my district."

"You remember her today?"

"Yeah, but...only who she is. I mean I know there's something between us...just not sure what it is." He poked at a spot on his leg and sucked in a breath between his teeth at the sharp stab of pain. "Snow said..." Peeta started to get images of his district in flames. The people...children... "She'd never kill those kids. Would she?"

"No, she wouldn't." Johanna spoke in a very quiet voice. "Tell me about them... about the kids in your district."

Peeta thought back to his school...his friends...dying in the fires and was overwhelmed with feelings of hostility. "Don't think I can."

"Sure you can. There's got to be some memory...something happy you can tap into. Think," Johanna encouraged him.

Sounds of children laughing rang through Peeta's ears. "I remember this one time," he turned his head towards Johanna, "it was right before the Quell. Prim and...*Prim*," Peeta remembered her vividly. He shook it off, not wanting to give Snow's men any ideas about erasing her from his life too. "I went to the bakery...was going to buy a few treats since I didn't wake up early enough to bake and I saw these kids...their faces were plastered up to the window. They were just looking at a cake my dad had on display..."

"Hey dad," Peeta looked around the bakery and noticed it was pretty well stocked up for late afternoon. "Slow day?"

"That's okay," his dad was always ready with a smile. "Tomorrow's another one."

Peeta glanced out the window and saw the hungry faces of the Seam kids staring at the treats lined up in the window of the bakery. "Good thing you're fully stocked today, pops. I'm needing a few things." He glanced over at Prim, "Don't we, Prim?"

"I guess. Mom just wanted some of those potato rolls for dinner." Peeta gestured out the window with his chin and Prim finally caught onto what he was suggesting. "But we're not here for mom are we?" His sister in law was a mind reader.

They bought every single sweet the bakery had to offer with the exception of the cake in the window which had been an order from the mayor. "You two think you can help us out?" Peeta called to the filthy boys that had been looking through the window. "We're on our way to the Seam, but can't carry all of this on our own."

The boys gave each other curious looks then simultaneously said, "Okay."

Peeta led them to an area by the meadow in the Seam. "This looks perfect. What do you think, Prim?"

"Perfect," she smiled. "I hope we have enough," she said quietly to Peeta before opening the first box and handing each boy a cookie. "Thank you for your help."

"What are your names?" Peeta asked them as he reached into his pocket for some coins.

"Jeremy," one of them said.

"Vista," the other said with wide eyes as he accepted the money from Peeta. "My sister is going to be jealous that I actually got to meet you. She's got a crush on you."

Prim smiled and said, "Most girls around here do, but you'll have to tell your sister he's taken by my sister." Her voice was filled with a lighthearted spirit. "How old is she?"

"Ten. Her name's Clarice."

Peeta opened up a box filled with cupcakes and said, "Why don't you tell your sister to come on by?"

The group of children that began to gather around them multiplied in no time. "Maybe I should have bought the entire store out?" Peeta asked Prim who was breaking a large muffin in two pieces so there was more to hand out.

"Peeta," Prim looked a little worried. "These kids are going to take us over." The crowd of children continued to get larger.

"Hmm..." Peeta tried to think of a way to get the children under control. "Prim, how are we going to keep them from overrunning us?"

Prim's eyes lit up. "We can tell them one of those stories Effie Trinket sent to you...in that book. Remember?"

"You mean the fairy tales?"

"Yeah, but...let's make up our own," Peeta hadn't seen Prim look so childlike and innocent since before Katniss went into the arena. Since before her father died.

"Sounds good to me." Peeta closed the boxes and heard the disgruntled moans from the kids. "All of you that haven't gotten anything yet need to sit on this side," Peeta motioned to the right. "Those of you that have had a treat already sit on Prim's side, and remember..." he gave them a playful stare, "...Prim knows who you are."

"How's she know?!" A kid from the crowd called out with chocolate on his chin.

"Because," Prim said loudly, "I'm a fairy godmother and have a...a..." she looked around and grabbed a long stick off of the ground, "...a magic stick."

"Wand," Peeta whispered to her.

"A magic wand!" Prim walked up to the boy that asked the question and waved the stick above his head, "You had something with chocolate."

"How," he looked like he was in shock, "how'd you do that?"

Prim ran her hand over the stick. "Not me...my wand, but it only works if you're a fairy godmother...which I am."

"So..." Peeta gave the crowd of kids a good long look, "Who's going to follow the rules?" The group of children scattered to their designated places like the wind. "This is what we're going to do. Prim and I are going to tell you all a story. Each person can come up and get their treat, then they have to take a seat on the side with the kids that already got something. Okay?"

A loud "Okay" chorused through the children.

For a brief second Peeta worried about gathering all the kids together like this, a crowd was never a good thing in the districts regardless of how old the group of people gathering were, but only a few Peacekeepers seemed to be paying attention to them now that he and Prim got the kids under control.

"This is going to be fun," Prim giggled. "Can I start?"

"Go ahead fairy godmother," Peeta motioned for the kids to make a line.

"This is the tale of the fair maiden Katniss and her knight in shining armor, Peeta."

Peeta laughed as Prim wove a tale of intrigue and mystery for the children of the Seam. Joined her when she looked to him for help filling in the blanks, and when all of the treats were handed out, Peeta pulled a ten year old little girl up with himself and Prim so she could play the role of the fair maiden Katniss. Until her mother called her home that is. Peeta's voice was calling out, "Fair maiden, don't forget your shoe!"

Kids of all ages were calling out, giggling, laughing...

"Oh nooooo!"

"She forgot her shoe!"

"What are you going to do Peeta the knight?"

"Give her back her shoe," he laughed and handed the little girl her shoe. "Thanks for being my fair maiden."

"You're welcome," the girl blushed and ran home.

"Woe is me," Peeta threw his arm across his forehead in a melodramatic move. "Will I ever see the fair maiden who haunts my dreams and makes the birds fall silent with her singing again?"

You need a fairy godmother," Prim said in a high pitched voice. She practically danced towards Peeta on tiptoes with a stick in her hand waving it about, "Peeta the knight," she laughed while she said it. "Allow me to be of service." She swirled the stick above his head. "If you think of your fair maiden Katniss, she will appear. She will place true love's kiss upon your lips and together you shall go to the ball, dance till the dawn breaks and live happily ever after. But there is a catch," Prim said. "You must love her till the end of time."

"I will fairy godmother," Peeta said eagerly. "I will." He closed his eyes tightly and said, "I'm thinking of her."

Peeta had no clue that Katniss had been in the background watching him and Prim until she walked through the crowd of children. Tiny faces took on a mixture of shock, surprise, joy and disbelief. The sound of Prim's giggle had Peeta opening up one eye just as Katniss' lips touched his. "You were thinking of me, so I thought it was time I appeared and gave you true love's kiss."

"She has appeared," Peeta wrapped an arm around Katniss' waist and made a grand gesture with his other towards the kids. "The fairy's magic worked!"

Prim started to laugh at the top of her lungs as the kids from the Seam clapped and surrounded them, talking over one another. "Now you've got to go to the ball and dance!" Prim called out over the kid's voices.

"Oh...oh yeah," Peeta stepped away from Katniss and held a hand out to her, "Fair maiden, may I have the honor of accompanying you to the ball?"

Katniss leaned over and whispered, "What's a ball?"

"A dance," Peeta mumbled. "Just say yes. We dance and then live happily ever after."

"Why yes," She choked on her laughter, "Peeta the knight, I would love to go to the ball."

"But first I must use my magic stick...wand," Prim corrected herself, "and give you a proper gown."

"Great, I have to get dressed up," Katniss complained.

"It's make believe, Katniss. Go with it," Peeta poked her in the ribs.

"Fine, but I'm not dancing."

Prim stood next to Katniss and waved her stick, "Okay everybody on the count of three say, ball gown. One. Two. Three."

The group of kids screamed out "BALL GOWN!"

"Poof!" Prim jumped back and clapped her hands to her cheeks. "Oh my goodness! She's beautiful!"

"Yay!"

Peeta couldn't hold back his smile when the kids began to cheer and clap.

Katniss leaned close to Peeta and spoke quietly, "Okay, one dance." With the exception of the very first Parcel Day, Peeta had never seen the children from the Seam look so happy. "What do I do next?" Katniss asked.

"Follow my lead," Peeta gathered a bunch of kids together, "In a circle...good. Now every boy stand in front of a girl and boys...if your true love is here, I'd suggest you stand in front of her. This is a magical ball you're at so you'll want to take advantage of that guys." Katniss smiled when the little girls started giggling and the boys started groaning. "Come on guys, you can't be a knight if you don't act like one. Stand up straight...have some manners. Great job!"

In the center of the circle stood Katniss with a know it all look upon her face. "Are you really getting all Effie Trinket on these kids?"

Peeta rolled his eyes up at her as he got down on one knee. "My fair maiden," he extended his hand to her, "Will you honor me with a dance?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why not?" Katniss shirked her shoulder.

"Katniss," Prim gave her sister a lecturing stare. "Do it the right way."

Peeta looked up at her expectantly and asked again, "Will you honor me with a dance?"

She let out a huge breath, shook her head from side to side and said, "The honor would be mine Peeta the knight."

"Okay, now watch our feet," Peeta called out to the kids, "and do what we do. Make it simple," he whispered in Katniss' ear as he guided her in a dance. When it was through he stepped away from her, turned to the kids and said, "And they lived happily ever after!"

"That was a great day," Peeta could taste the blood from a cut in his lip that had reopened from his smiling. "Pretty good night too."

"Do I really want to hear about that?" Johanna rolled her head towards Peeta. "Disgusting. No wonder you're having a baby. You two were probably like rabbits."

"Who's having a baby?" Peeta asked Johanna and heard her sigh.

Johanna let out a burst of air. "Here we go again."

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"This is wonderful news! Wonderful!" Plutarch exclaimed as the room of rebels began congratulating one another on their triumphant morning. Both the Mockingjay as well as the Jabberjay had taken their place in the war. "We'll need to act quickly...create some form of propos for the people of the country putting questions in their mind as to why Peeta would say such treasonous things."

"Propos?" Katniss asked.

"Yes. Yes," Plutarch answered her. "We were planning on launching a series of airtime assaults against the Capitol...use their greatest weapon against them. Television." Plutarch got lost in a conversation with his assistant. Then turned his attention to Coin. "We should let the rebels in the districts know of Peeta's unwavering allegiance so they don't lose faith..."

"NO! You can't put that on television." Katniss yelled out. "What do you think will happen to him if President Snow finds out he sent me a message?"

"Girl's got a point," Haymitch moved closer to her. "The boy has his own weapon right now and Snow doesn't know about it. I say we keep it that way."

"But if he's with us, we need to let people know..." someone from the rebellion began and the debate as to whether or not Peeta's secret should come to light began.

Fighting amongst the rebels, Katniss quickly realized, was the norm until President Coin finally opened her mouth in that overly controlled

tone of hers, silencing the whole room. "Can we all agree that it's for the best that the rebels fighting in the districts should be aware that their Jabberjay hasn't turned against them?"

Even Katniss had to agree with that. She was the one that wanted to make sure people knew Peeta hadn't betrayed them. "Yes," she said cautiously.

"However, Haymitch's point about Peeta's weapon can't be overlooked." Coin paused, giving some thought to the situation for a few moments then suggested, "What if we questioned the broadcast? We determined it was prerecorded. Why? Why hold onto the recording instead of playing it right away?"

"And why'd he look so good?" Gale asked. "I mean...if he's a prisoner of war, why would they..." he turned to Katniss, "What did you call that thing again? You said he looked like he got a body shine?"

"Polish," she began to worry. Why did he look so good?

"Yeah." Gale continued, "Why'd they give him one of those?"

Haymitch pointed a finger at Gale, "To make us think he's being treated well, but we know he's not. Effie's message told us that."

Katniss could feel the bile rising to her throat. She knew they were torturing Peeta, that he was on the brink of death, but all of these accusations being thrown around made her imagination run wild.

"They're beating him," she said under her breath. "They want us to think he's fine and all the while they're beating him...starving him...doing God knows...knows..." her voice began to quiver.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you all!" Finnick yelled out. "And none of you have been paying any attention to me! None of you! We need to get them out now! Not tomorrow. Not next week. Now! Today!"

"We have to work out a plan first," Plutarch said. "However, if there is a traitor within the rebellion...would it even matter what the plan was?"

"First thing's first," Coin took control of the conversation before it got out of hand. "Plutarch, create a propos of Peeta's interview with Caesar, asking the very same questions we've asked in this room today and provide plausible explanations. We cannot let the Capitol know of his message to Katniss." Finally the woman did something that Katniss agreed with, but she still hated her. "We finish it up with a shot of our very own Mockingjay asking President Snow why the interview wasn't live. This might prompt another interview from the Capitol, a live one, and give Peeta an opportunity to speak to Katniss again." Katniss found herself liking this plan. "Are we all in agreement?" The room was unanimous. Coin spoke to her directly, "Katniss?"

"Sounds good to me," Katniss agreed.

"Then let's get to work," Coin finished and Katniss had to wonder about the woman. On one hand she was willing to order an abortion without blinking an eye, on the other she wanted to help to protect Peeta's secret and keep him safe now that she knew he was loyal. Katniss watched as the president spoke to a few uniformed soldiers then turned her attention to a communication device on her wrist.

"Come here sweetheart," Haymitch's voice broke Katniss from her spell.

She moved towards the small group of people huddled round Plutarch who was complaining about something. "...coffee. I ask you, would it

be so unthinkable to have something to wash down the gruel and turnips?"

Fulvia, her face to Katniss as she massaged Plutarch's shoulders. "We didn't think it would be so rigid here. At least not for the higher ranks."

"Or at least a little side action," Plutarch rolled his neck a bit. "Even Twelve had a black market, right?"

"Yeah," Gale answered. "The Hob. That's where Katniss and I did our trades."

"There!" Plutarch gestured to the pair. "You see? And look at how moral they are." He let out a loud sigh. "Thank goodness wars don't last forever."

Katniss lifted her eyes to Gale who was staring at the man as though he had two heads and bit back her exasperated sigh. "So...um...what's next?"

Without missing a beat Plutarch held out his hand and Fulvia placed a sketchbook inside of it. "I was told to give this to you, but not until you agreed to become the Mockingjay. We are all aware that you have mixed feelings about your role, but we're hoping this will help." Plutarch handed her the book.

The sight of a sketchbook had her thinking of only one person. Peeta. Had he drawn something for her in hopes that she'd take up the position the rebels so desperately needed her to? "Cinna," Katniss breathed out as she opened the book and saw the artfully sketched design on the first page. She flipped through each of the pages looking at the well crafted uniform her late friend planned out for her. Spots for knives, layers of body armor, hidden weapons throughout, a

special reinforcement over her heart...and on the second to the last page an additional sketch added in, providing an impenetrable shield over her womb. Katniss' trailed her fingertips over the drawing and swallowed the thickening feeling in her throat, as she read Cinna's words, *'I'm still betting on you...on both of you.'* On the last page a sketch, not Cinna's though... "Peeta," Katniss finally let the tears fall.

"Cinna told us that he drew that the night you two were married," Plutarch informed her. "Peeta's sketch of your pin and his locket was the source of inspiration for much of this rebellion, Katniss. Your training uniforms...our battle cry...your interview costumes... Your husband had no idea how powerful the symbol of your love would be for this nation."

Katniss gripped the locket that hung around her neck and said, "Peeta knew his whole life. He was just waiting for the rest of the world to catch up."

"Want to see his book sweetheart?" Haymitch asked. "Portia created one for him."

"Can I?"

"Of course," Plutarch's hand shot out to which Fulvia instantly responded. "This is Peeta's. Portia was hoping to be here with us to create the garments for both of you. Unfortunately..." Plutarch waved his hand in the air, "Well, that's neither here nor there. The important thing is that you both wear their designs with pride and look your best while doing so."

Peeta's designs were much like Katniss' only more masculine. On the last page of his book there was a sketch that Katniss had never seen before, but she knew her husband's works of art. "Oh, Peeta. It's our oak tree." Beneath it Portia wrote, *'Are you ready, Peeta?'* Katniss

smiled to herself. Peeta had told her how Portia always asked him that before important moments of his life. "He will be, Portia. He will be." Katniss gently closed the cover of the book and handed it back to Plutarch.

"Katniss," Fulvia began, "This is our plan. We're going..." an obnoxiously loud yawn came from behind the woman.

"Sorry," Haymitch yawned again. "Ain't been sleeping much."

"You look like shit, Haymitch," Katniss eyed him up. "Go take a nap. I'll be fine."

"Nah, I'm good sweetheahhhhh..." He yawned again. "Yeah. Okay." Haymitch got up and stretched. "If you need me...leave me the hell alone. I'm sleeping."

Katniss glanced up at Gale. "That's my mentor."

"You must be so proud," Gale teased her.

"As I was saying," Fulvia continued, "our plan is to build you up from the outside...*in*. Let's find the most stunning Mockingjay look possible for the propos."

She would've asked earlier, but didn't want to look like an idiot. "What is a propos...exactly?" Katniss asked now that everyone was gone.

"A propaganda spot...propos," Plutarch explained. "Years ago, Beetee redesigned the underground network that transmits all of the television broadcasts, which will give us the ability to launch the airtime assaults, like the one we'll create of Peeta's interview, for all of Panem to see."

"Oh," Katniss wasn't sure about it, but if Beetee was involved, she knew it had to be complicated. "So now you want to make me look like a mockingjay?"

"Not a mockingjay," Fulvia said. "*The Mockingjay*. Hair. Makeup. The works."

"Well, you've already got the costume," Gale gave his shoulder a little shrug.

Plutarch and Fulvia began discussing amongst themselves. "Do we do bloody and disgusting?"

"Glamorous? Like the interviews?"

"We should go for something more...worn, but just how grimy can we make her?" Plutarch eyed Katniss up and down. "Good thing we have another surprise for you."

Both Fulvia and Plutarch head towards the door only to have Fulvia turn and summon Gale and Katniss with the wave of a hand, "Come. Come."

Gale leaned down and whispered, "So well intended and yet so insulting."

"Welcome to the Capitol," Katniss gave him a quirk of her lips.

Plutarch checked over his notes, "Compartment three-nine-oh-eight." He led them into an elevator and pressed the button marked 39, but nothing happened.

"Try your key," Fulvia suggested.

"Oh. Oh. Yes," Plutarch said as though he had lost his head.

Katniss waited in the quiet elevator, wondering where they were heading and from the expressions on Fulvia and Plutarch's faces, they didn't know either, but Gale's face read something entirely different. She glanced up at him, gave his arm a little tug and asked, "Been down here before?" She watched as Gale swallowed hard and avoided her stare. "Gale?" There was no time to wait for an answer as the doors opened and they all stepped out. The dark and desolate area seemed out of place as did the heavily armed guard that rounded the corner and accosted them.

"You have the wrong floor," the guard barked before Plutarch could even speak.

"We were just looking for..."

"I said you have the wrong floor. Leave! Now!"

Gale met Katniss' worried frown. She could sense trouble even before the guard showed up, but from what she hadn't a clue. She could see the room they were supposed to go to, hear a noise coming from within, but there was no way she'd get past District Thirteen's version of a Peacekeeper. The sound...a whimpering noise, escaped the room again and Katniss dropped Cinna's sketchbook to the ground.

"Here, I'll get that for you," Gale bent down, blocking the guard's way and Katniss took off running towards the noise like a bat out of hell.

The stench of urine hit her before she even reached the room. Sweat...blood...antiseptic...but none of those caused the bile to rise to her throat. It wasn't until she actually saw her prep team's frail, beaten bodies...Flavius and Octavia cowering against a wall, Venia laying on the cold cement ground, that Katniss feared she'd lose her breakfast. "Who..." she ran to Venia, puddled on the floor and took her hand, "What happened? Who did this to you? Why...why are you here?"

Plutarch's voice bellowed out behind her, "What on earth is going on in here?!"

"Why are you here?" Katniss continued to ask Venia.

"Flavius told us we were needed the night you broke out..." Katniss' eyes flashed up at the man then back down to Venia, "...we were put onto a hovercraft and brought here."

"Flavius?" Katniss looked up at him, "Why would you bring them here with you?"

"Cinna requested it," Plutarch answered.

Katniss stood up, rage coursing through her veins. "You think Cinna requested *this*?!" She pointed at their abused bodies. "Why are they being punished?" Katniss' eyes were burning, but she already knew the answer. There was a traitor code named orange blossom and Flavius had orange hair, but the rebels had just found out about that earlier in the morning...or had they? "Never mind."

"They stole food," the guard said with evil in his eyes.

"She was hungry," Venia lifted her head off the ground in an attempt to sit up. "It was only one slice of bread she took."

Octavia began to blubber against the wall, her skin which was once a taut bright green, now hung limp and dull. "Shh," Katniss crawled across the floor towards her and felt an enormous amount of guilt when the girl flinched at her touch. "It'll be alright, Octavia. I'll get you out of here."

"All of this because she took a slice of bread?" Katniss asked. "Seems a bit extreme to me."

"This wasn't the first time," the guard said glaring at Octavia. "She was warned and chose to ignore them."

"Unchain them," Katniss spoke in a low, demanding voice, but the guard didn't move. "NOW!"

"On whose authority?" The guard questioned her.

'Well,' Katniss thought to herself, 'here it goes.' "On the Mockingjay's authority, that's who." After a few words from Plutarch and a phone call, 'probably placed to Coin, herself,' thought Katniss, the trio was released into Plutarch's custody. The message couldn't have been clearer to Katniss. 'You're a figurehead. Not an actual leader.'

"Where are we going?" Octavia asked in the most timid voice Katniss had ever heard come out of the woman.

"To the hospital. My doctor is there and she's working with my mother and sister now, so the three of you will be taken care of." Katniss held onto the girl's hand. "I won't let anything happen to you three." This she promised herself. They had no idea what they had gotten themselves into when they stepped onto that hovercraft. Even Flavius, a member of the rebellion, looked as though he was completely lost in this new world known as District Thirteen.

The sight of the medical bay where Katniss had spent her first days in the new district stirred up many uncomfortable memories. The worst being Coin's voice ordering Dr. Valero to put an end to her pregnancy for the sake of the rebellion. Putting it out of her mind wasn't getting any easier, though Regina had told her she had to try and find a way to do so. In truth it was more of a warning than friendly or medical advice. Seeing her sister and mother working alongside of Lavinia and the doctor was a welcome sight though. "Mom?"

"Katniss," her mother quickly look past her to the patients in need of attention. "Come in."

Dr. Valero gave Flavius, Octavia and Venia a quick once over then left them in Evelyn's capable hands. "Katniss, I'm glad you're here. It saved me from having to call you in for an exam," Regina turned to the room. "If you'll excuse us. I need to examine my patient."

"Want me to come with you, Catnip?" Gale asked.

Katniss took in a breath through her nose and released it. They had made up...they were friends again, but Gale didn't seem to understand the concept of boundaries. There were some things in her life that needed to remain private. Regardless of whether or not she was pregnant, Katniss would have never agreed to let him into an exam room with her. That was a personal thing. Not meant for platonic eyes. "Gale, this is one of those things that a husband goes to, not a friend."

"Right," there was a slight tint of red in Gale's cheeks. "We'll just wait here then."

"Shall we?" Dr. Valero led her into a private exam room and locked the door behind her. "Have a seat on the table."

"Oh...um...okay." Katniss didn't think she was actually going to get an exam. She was expecting some type of lecture about letting Prim in on the secret or maybe some advice about the whole anemia thing Prim came up with, but an actual exam? "Is everything alright?"

Regina gave her a concerned look, "You tell me. Still talking to Peeta?"

Katniss could feel her cheeks burn as she quietly answered, "Yes."

"Do you think that's wise given your new position?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Katniss could hear herself whining and wanted more than anything to stop, but how could she? Keeping her emotions under control hadn't exactly been up to her lately. "I know everyone thinks I'm crazy, but...Regina, it's the only thing keeping me sane."

"Have you tried what I suggested? Repeating things you're certain of. Your name...age..."

"Yes and it doesn't do a damn thing, but make me remember how horrible my life is here." 'And now you've got the pout to go with the whine,' Katniss knew she was acting like a spoiled child and tried to figure out how she was going to be someone else's mother when she still acted like a baby herself at times. "Talking to Peeta helps me. I've been trying not to do it in public, though I think I did it this morning, but other than that... Please don't ask me to stop. It's the only way I can hold onto him."

Regina sat on the exam table next to her and took her hand. "As long as you're trying to control it. That's all I ask. I don't want you to lose your mind, Katniss. I kind of like you." She gave her shoulder a little bump. "There aren't too many of us pregos around here. We've got to stick together."

Katniss smiled a little. "How have you been doing?"

"Good. Miss having Justus around." Regina sighed. "I find myself signing when he's not even near."

"And you think *I'm* losing my mind?"

Regina let out a soft laugh and said, "I have an idea, but I'm not sure if you'll like it."

"Your ideas have worked out pretty well for me so far," Katniss trusted this woman.

"How do you feel about writing?"

"I suck at it. Words aren't my thing. They're Peeta's."

Regina stood up and walked to a drawer, pulled out a book and handed it to Katniss. "This is a medical journal doctors give to patients so they can document their feelings...whatever's on your mind. Might I suggest you try it?" Katniss gave the book a skeptical look. "Just try it. There's no right or wrong when you write things in it. You don't have to share it with anyone, but yourself."

"Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I've never been able to express myself in words," Katniss usually felt like an idiot when she tried to speak the way Peeta did so effortlessly.

"I happen to know for a fact that's not true." Regina leaned against the exam table. "You express yourself to Peeta every time you talk to him. My suggestion is, write some of those things down. Things you wish you could say to him...that you want to tell him when he gets back."

Katniss rolled her eyes and Regina threw her hands up in the air.

"Write a poem...a list of ingredients for making succotash...a song...I don't care." She closed her hand over Katniss' and said, "All I know is you have a lot inside that you need to get out, and talking to Peeta will only go so far. There are some things you'll want to go back to, and writing them down might be the answer to that."

"Okay." Katniss held onto the book. "I'll try."

"Good. Now...let's talk about Prim."

"Uh oh," Katniss bit her lip. "I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"Actually, I was going to thank you. Your sister and mother are...they're truly gifted. I've put in a request to have your sister train as a physician's assistant with me, and just found out it was approved. Now I'll be able to get her into medical training classes," There was a smile plastered across Regina's face.

"Medical training classes?"

"Yes. Your sister wants to be a doctor and I'd like to help get her started." Regina nodded brightly. "She's got the gift of a physician."

Katniss' got a soft look in her eyes and said, "Peeta always said she'd be a doctor. 'Mark my words Katniss, your sister is going to be the first person to make it out of the Seam and into medical school.'" She gripped the book in her hands even tighter thinking she might write something about that in it, she just didn't know what to say. Katniss chewed at her bottom lip, stepped down to the ground and turned to Regina. "I can't make any promises with this book thing, but I'll try. Thanks for thinking of me."

"I think of you all the time," Regina smiled and reached for Katniss' hand. "Come here," she placed it on her stomach. "Feel that?" There was a pounding against the flat of Katniss' palm. "That's Adam."

"Adam?" Katniss was enthralled with the steady thumping against her hand. "The name Justus and I decided on. Adam."

"I like it," the pounding stopped. "When does that start?" Katniss couldn't wait to feel her own child move. "The moving?"

"Any time during your second trimester," Regina spoke quietly. "Have you been keeping tabs on things?" Katniss nodded. "Good. I told Prim about the device I gave to you. I'd like you to give it to her tomorrow so she can bring it in with her. I'm going to teach her how to work it. There are a few more complex things it can do I didn't think you really needed to know."

"Dr. Everdeen," Katniss said softly as she walked towards the door leading to the room where the rest of the group waited for her. "All of Prim's dreams are coming true, Peeta," Katniss' lips moved. "Now come home to me and make mine come true too. I want to be a family and it won't work without you."

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Effie slammed the door to her quarters shut in her security officer's face and stormed into her private residency. Her mother would have had a fit if she were alive to see such a thing, but Effie was furious. She heard the door open and yelled in a very unladylike voice, "Get out! Get out of here this instant!"

"I'm sorry ma'am. I can't do that," Steven Tanner secured the door closed and walked through Effie's home checking to make sure it was free of danger.

"You *must* be kidding me." Effie went to the bar and poured a glass of whiskey, lifted it in the air, silently toasting Haymitch wherever he was, then drank it down. "You have some nerve securing my quarters immediately after threatening my life!" She tossed the glass at his head, which he expertly ducked.

"Miss. Trinket, I was only doing what the president ordered," her security guard said as though holding a knife to her throat was justifiable behavior.

"He ordered you to protect me, yet you didn't think twice about volunteering to hold me at knife point!" Effie poured another drink in a fresh glass.

"I wouldn't have killed you ma'am," The guard stood several yards away from her with his hands behind his back and his legs spread apart. "The oath I took was to protect you. That is why I volunteered to take you into that room with Peeta, ma'am."

Effie's drink stopped midway to her lips. "Pardon me?"

"In order to protect you, it was necessary for me to threaten your life." He let his eyes flash to Effie's than continually scanned the windows and doorways. "If any other Peacekeeper had been in my position and President Snow ordered them to kill you, they would have without hesitation. I on the other hand would not have been able to, due to the oath I am sworn to uphold."

Effie shook her head in an attempt to make sense of his logic. "In order to keep me safe you had to threaten my safety." She threw a hand in the air and said with a flourish, "Why that makes *perrrfect* sense. Why I should be kissing the *very* ground you walk on."

"No need to thank me ma'am," he said sincerely. "Just doing my job."

"Thank you?" She could have killed the man where he stood. "Thank you!"

"If you insist...you're welcome ma'am." This time the glass that flew at the Peacekeeper's head was full of whiskey and wet his uniform.

"You are a complete and total baboon!" Effie stormed up to him and pointed a finger under his chin, "And now you smell like rot gut! Go change!"

"I shouldn't leave you..."

"GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!" Effie's whole body was shaking. She ripped her jacket off and threw it on a chair, another thing her mother would take her to task for, then headed back to the bar. "At this rate, I'm going to run out of glasses," she said under her breath as she poured another drink. She threw an evil look in the direction of Steven Tanner, Peacekeeper of all Peacekeepers and said, "If you do not leave me alone to collect my thoughts I shall throw each and every breakable item in this room at your head. You might be able to dodge the majority of them, Mr. Tanner, but the odds are usually in the favor of those of us from the Capitol, not those of you from the districts. Please change your clothing so I do not have to continue to smell the stench of whiskey on your uniform."

"There are Peacekeepers posted at the back entrance. I'll summon one of them to come in here while I..." he ducked as glass after glass was thrown at him until finally one hit him in the head leaving a freely bleeding cut across his forehead and into his hairline.

"Hah! Shall I move onto the bottles or will you leave me alone?!" For a brief second Effie missed fighting with Haymitch. He would have never let her throw multiple glasses at his head, but they would've had a

rousing argument which left her even angrier at how lonely she was without him.

Steven Tanner lifted his hand to the gash in his head, then spoke into a band on his wrist. "Unit three, this is unit one. Come in." he waited for a response. "Unit one to unit three, come in."

Effie arched a brow and said, "Perhaps unit two has a knife to unit three's throat." She could see the frustration in his eyes...the question as to whether or not he should check it out. "I can see it now, unit three is probably lying in a pool of his own blood. Rebels could be in the rose garden at this very minute."

"Unit two, this is unit one. Come in," Mr. Tanner spoke with authority in his voice. "This is unit one, are there any available units surrounding the Trinket Residency?"

"No answer?" Effie slipped a few ice cubes into another glass and hoped that the rebels really were on their way in. "Shall I prepare for an invasion? Perhaps that vile pest Haymitch has returned to seek his revenge on me. Well, I suppose I should pour the man a drink!" She poured one and drank it taking comfort in the warmth of the alcohol as it soothed her from the inside out.

"Follow me," Steven took her by the arm and led her through the furnished guest house until he got to the master suite. He pushed a portrait of President Snow to the side and pressed a button against the wall to reveal a passageway. "Through here."

The corner of Effie's lip lifted in delight. Steven Tanner had shown her a way out of her prison in an attempt to keep her safe, but there was nothing to keep her safe from. Effie stopped in the ladies room to check her throat in the mirror after the event with Peeta. Since the collar on her jacket got in the way of her view, she took it off and

realized the brooch President Snow made her wear was bunched up inside of it and now one could see her. She quickly began to fumble with some buttons on the computer that Plutarch had given her, and wound up inadvertently turning off the communication bands of anyone within fifty feet of the computer's generated signal. She had been trying to open up a line of communication with District Thirteen, but she couldn't complain with the results of her tinkering. How long the communication devices would be out of order she hadn't a clue, but Effie was willing to play her current situation up for all it was worth. "Did you hear that?" She spoke softly as she walked quickly down the corridor behind her guard. "It sounded like gunfire."

"Keep going ma'am. There's an exit up ahead." He put his hand on his weapon and held a finger up to silence her. "Stay here ma'am. I need to make certain we're secure."

"Won't more guards be joining us? Surely the Capitol can see that we may be in danger," Effie's worries came out in a whisper.

"There are no cameras in here ma'am. Shh," he froze in place and listened carefully. "Stay put."

Effie had to admire the man that moved swiftly down the hall on the tips of his boots without a sound and disappeared into the darkness. She looked up and down the hallway curious as to where it let out and took a few steps in the direction they were originally heading. The sound of something large being plunged into water and a woman's cries echoed through a tiny vent in the ceiling above her. 'Johanna,' she was certain that's who she was listening to.

"Miss. Trinket?" Her guard's walk was much more casual. "It seems that communications were down for a few minutes, but they're back up again. It's safe to return to your quarters."

"Well, that's a relief," Effie walked hurriedly back down the passageway towards him so he couldn't hear Johanna's cries for help. "Fortunately you had the good sense to get me out of there in a timely manner. Why...what if the rebels *had* returned to the Capitol?" She took in a sharp breath. "Oh my, Mr. Tanner. It seems I've injured you. Can you forgive my behavior. I was simply distraught over having my life threatened."

"As I said, Miss. Trinket, technically I never threatened your life. I was trying to save it, but there are no worries," he lifted his fingers to his head which still had blood dripping from it, "I've had worse while training to become a Peacekeeper."

"Regardless, I shall tend to you immediately upon our return." She lifted her chin. "I shall go with you to the medical bay and make certain they care for you." 'Besides,' she thought to herself, 'I need to stock up on a few supplies.' "Come. Come now. Let's not dilly dally." Effie put a fresh change of clothing on, leaving the jacket with the hidden camera in the brooch on the chair. If the president asked her why she wasn't wearing it, she'd simply tell him it slipped her mind after the event with Peeta and her security detail. She walked with Steven to the medical bay and left him in the doctor's care, "I shall wait for you." Her guard was about to protest until the door closed in his face and a team of medical professionals went to work on his laceration. 'You've got about ten minutes, Effie,' she told herself and felt her heart beating at a rapid pace. The area that held Peeta's tracker jacker venom was only two rooms away. She had been there before she had a private guard to switch the potent drugs with the diluted version they used in the arena. If she could only get there unnoticed one more time, but the hallways were lined with staff. "Pardon me," Effie lifted her finger and spoke to a physician's assistant standing closest to the doorway she needed to get into. "My security officer is being worked on and I was wondering if

you could wait for an update while I excuse myself to..." she lowered her voice down, "...the ladies."

The assistant handed over a tiny computerized clipboard to another member of the medical staff and said, "Which room?"

Effie pointed it out and continued down the hall as though she were heading for the ladies room then quickly headed back to her original destination. The locked door didn't stand in her way. Effie punched in the one of the Capitol official's security codes, compliments of Plutarch's computer system that overrode their system effortlessly, and entered the room with no one the wiser. A quick scan of the canisters that lined the shelves...a few switched labels and she was done. The drugs to lower his body temperature at a rapid rate were another story. Since Peeta had been dosed in the arena, Effie had been privy to some very interesting things regarding the tracker jacker venom.

"Miss. Trinket?" The physician in charge of Peeta's hijacking was preparing the equipment for his first dosage the following day. "You had some concerns in regards to being left alone with the prisoner after his treatments?"

"Yes." 'Not really,' Effie fought not to say it out loud. "How am I to know he won't become volatile and hostile towards me?" 'And how do I reverse whatever you're doing to him?' She needed to find out.

"I suppose none of us know for certain," he answered as he fiddled with some tubes.

"Doctor, am I to understand that you claim to be the expert in this field and you have no clue how the patient will respond to this?" Effie bristled. "Well, I shall inform President Snow immediately of..."

"No. No..." the doctor stopped what he was doing. "We will be triggering particular memories of Peeta's and watching his brainwave functions here," he pointed to a computer monitor. "This will enable us to get a read of the area to target. While his mind is concentrating on one particular area, in this instance Katniss, we will be able to alter those memories by administering the tracker jacker venom. Peeta should only feel his hostilities towards the areas we target."

"And there is no way of outwitting you?" Effie said through pursed lips as though she didn't believe the doctor.

"Absolutely not," he said through an air of superiority.

"Then explain to me how he was able to practically snap right out of his hallucinations while he was in the arena. It seems to me, if he could do that, he could do it here. Again...I'm sure the president would be..."

"Miss. Trinket, the drugs used in the arena were more of a...designer drug. Created as a form of..." the doctor looked away, "...they hold entertainment value. They are a weaker...more diluted compound of tracker jacker venom. If used socially and in small doses through the bloodstream, it can provide a very pleasurable break from reality. If it were to be used continually on a regular basis then one may become addicted or suffer the same effects regular tracker jacker venom can cause. Not quite as severe, but still quite dangerous. Which is why we did some studies and found that a person's body temperature had much to do with how well the venom worked on a person."

"Their temperature?"

"Yes. Which is why this arena in particular was perfect for the venom. The hotter a person is, the stronger the hallucinations. This is also why the drug has been laced with an additive to increase a person's

body temperature. You'd be amazed at how much of a difference two degrees up or down can make when dealing with jacker juice."

"Jacker juice?" Effie had heard the name before. Someone had entered the black market while she was leaving looking for some.

"Pardon me. That is the name it goes by," the doctor said quietly, "on the streets of the Capitol."

Effie nodded her head. "I see. Is there any chance of someone overdosing on this?"

"Of course, however that can be taken care of with a simple shot. As a matter of fact, it's what we used to bring Peeta out of his fantasy world while in the arena only in a gaseous form," the doctor said proudly.

"So as you can see. Peeta did not simply snap out of it. We helped him along in the process."

"Forgive me for thinking you had no experience in this area doctor," Effie flashed him a flirtatious grin, "obviously I was mistaken."

"If you ask anyone who the leading expert is on tracker jacker venom, they will most likely point you in my direction," his chest puffed out.

"Then you must know about this...jacker juice as well."

"Know about it. I created it," he said proudly.

*"Oh my," Effie fanned herself a little. "Smart **and** handsome. Two very attractive qualities in a man."*

The homely physician's face grew red. "Miss. Trinket, would you...would you be interested in having a drink with me sometime?"

Effie fluttered her lashes and walked slowly up to him. "I'd love to, only...it would be wise to keep it to ourselves. With my new position as the president's assistant, rumors tend to fly, and we wouldn't want anyone to think you received your position because we were seeing one another socially."

"No. That would lesson my work."

"Exactly." Effie patted his hand, "Tonight? We could meet somewhere."

"I'm staying in the doctor's residencies in the medical bay. We could have a drink there."

"That sounds lovely. Shall we say, ten o'clock?" Effie was going to pick the man's brain clean and quite possibly the medical bay.

"Yes. Ten o'clock it is."

"Till then. Toodle ooh." As Effie walked out of the office she reminded herself to do a little research about the man she had just made a date with. Most importantly she needed to find out the doctor's name. When she met up with him that night, she accepted several glasses of wine and truly hoped his plant enjoyed the Merlot, because Effie couldn't stomach it. She found out his name was Dr. Louis Avalon and his grandfather had been the head scientist in the original development of tracker jackers.

"One of the reasons I became a doctor was because of his notes on the genetically engineered species. They were so sure at the time that nothing could counteract large doses of the venom," The doctor poured himself another glass of wine, his fourth by Effie's calculations, and continued talking, "positive that they had created the perfect

weapon, but even as a child, my brilliant mind found flaws in their way of thinking."

"Yes, I'm sure it did," Effie sat back in her chair and hung onto his every word. Trying to learn as much about the poison that was going to be pumped into her darling boy's system. "So smart...I'm sure you saw the weaknesses in the tracker jacker's venom."

"Why yes I did." He sat too close to Effie for her comfort. "For example, I warned them that the gas used in the arena would only be temporary and that no one would know if or how it would work on Katniss considering she...her situation..."

"You mean her pregnancy?"

"Yes," the doctor sipped at his glass. "Beetee was spot on when he spoke of the proteins. It wouldn't have made much of a difference if she had gotten stung by an actual tracker jacker, but jacker juice...that compound is completely different. Even the slightest change in a chemical compound can...uh...change the chemical compound."

"Yes," Effie held her smile back noticing the man's intoxication. Knowing this was the perfect time to pounce on him. "I bet they look completely different too, don't they?"

"Nope." He drained his wine glass. "Look the same."

"Oh, I don't believe you. I bet one is bright yellow and the other is dark blue or something like that." Effie waved her hand at him. "You're only saying they look alike."

"No. The only difference in appearance is the smell." The doctor started to chuckle. "Guess that's not really appearance. It's pretty green."

"It's pretty or it's green?" Effie asked.

"Both," the doctor slurred slightly. "Hey," he whispered. "Want to see it?"

Effie's fingers flew to her chest, "Could I? I'd love to see the differences between the real venom you'll be giving to that..." she made a disgusted face, "...that vile boy from District Twelve, and the jacker juice you created."

"Come on," he held his arm out to her as he fumbled to his feet. "I'll give you a little tour of the place."

Switching the labels while the inebriated physician went on a diatribe about his efforts to prove how wrong his grandfather was, was easy enough. The doctor didn't shut up and kept looking over the antidotes he was working on to reverse the effects of tracker jacker venom. The substance used to counteract the jacker juice was another story. It was behind lock and key. A glass case with tubes, vials and prepared injections were lined up. Effie knew she had to get her hands on one of them...more of them if possible. "Oh Dr. Avalon," she beckoned the man who was looking at the tubes running up the wall and through the ceiling. "How does one use these?"

"Simple enough really," he spoke into the lock and it was released. "This is the gas form," he held up a large canister. "That's what we used in the arena and thiiiiis," he put the canister down and picked up a tray full of tubes. "These are the condensed versions of the injections. Can't use those unless they're mixed with the solution which is..." his finger and eyes started scanning the room, "Where is it?" He stepped away from the case and Effie slipped a tube as well as a handful of filled needles into her purse. "Oh, there it is! It's a seventy-thirty mix." He turned back to the case, "Then we've got the shots. One of those in the base of the neck and it can change a

person's temperature back to its normal state. It drops it first," he chuckled again, "then it goes back to regular. Got to kill the active...um...uh..." the doctor tried to get his mind back on track. "Uh...Perhaps we should call it a night."

"Why of course. You have a very busy day ahead of you tomorrow," Effie really wished the man hadn't drank the last glass of wine. "Perhaps we could do this again sometime?"

"Sure. I'd like that." Effie walked him back to his quarters where the man tried to kiss her goodnight and fell face first into the cushions on his sofa.

The sound of her private security detail yelling snapped Effie out of her stupor. She walked quickly down the hallway towards his room and noticed the man was standing outside of it with his weapon in hand, ready to take on anyone that stood in his way. "Mr. Tanner! What on earth are you doing?"

"No one knew where you had gone to," his eyes narrowed in on her. "You are not to leave my side Miss. Trinket." he pushed past the medical personal and took hold of Effie's arm.

"Am I not allowed to use the restroom any longer?" Effie pulled her arm out of his firm grasp. "Will you please stop it!" She stood in the hall trying her best to ignore the stares from the doctors and their attendants. "I am a lady Mr. Tanner and you will treat me as such."

"You are my responsibility Miss. Trinket," he countered, "and you will start acting like the responsible lady I know you are, and quit roaming around without me."

"You would do kindly to remember your place, Mr. Tanner." Effie pursed her lips together and stormed away from him towards her quarters. "I am a grown woman."

"I know that ma'am," Steven said as he easily caught up to her side.

"I can make my own decisions," Effie wanted to punch her guard in the nose. "Did they fix your head?"

"Yes ma'am. Thank you for asking."

"Oh for criminy's sake!" Effie found herself being pushed against a wall while her guard checked a dark corridor. "Ridiculous! Absolutely ridiculous! You have no problems leaving me in some rat filled tunnel, but I can't walk in a sterile hallway of the medical bay? One must really question your logic Mr. Tanner."

"The tunnels are safe." he turned to face Effie, "These are unpredictable at best." One more quick look around, "Let's go."

Effie was curious as to all of these hidden passageways she had come across since joining the rebellion. It was a long shot asking her Peacekeeper about them, they were trained to stay in the background, and not converse with the people they protected, but Mr. Tanner wasn't like most Peacekeepers, Effie noticed. He took his training, his position seriously, a little too seriously for Effie's tastes. He played by the rules, as far as she could see. Where many Peacekeepers were known to accept bribes to look the other way, she highly doubted Steven Tanner would even consider such a thing. Still, Effie took a shot in the dark and asked, "How do you know those tunnels are safe...and where did they come from?"

"They've been here for hundreds of years. There was a network of them that ran throughout the nation called the underground railroad."

Effie's was shocked at how free Mr. Tanner was with this information, and absolutely stunned by what he said next. "Since being discovered, the Capitol has repaired them...secured them...the one that leads from your room also leads into the President's main home, the official's offices...it's a way for the men in charge to *stay* in charge during times such as these. An escape route that leads out to the bottom of the Tribute Center."

'Or a way for rebel forces to get the upper hand,' Effie had to fight to hide her smile. 'Now I know how the rebels are going to break us out of here. All I have to do is tell them.'

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It was a welcome feeling having Catnip back in his life. Having her stand next to him during the morning meeting brought a feeling of nostalgia to Gale, like the old days when they'd go hunting and they had each other's backs. They shared something special back then, not just a friendship, it was more than that. When they were in the woods tracking game, they didn't need words, 'Never needed to move our lips either,' the thought brought a small smile to Gale's face. They were able to communicate with one another, send each other signals as to what their next move would be. Do they follow the tracks? Do they each take a side? Gale missed that form of camaraderie with Katniss and being with her that morning in the meeting, having her voice publicly that he was important to her, meant a lot to him. He

wasn't too proud of that fact that it stirred up emotional feelings that had nothing to do with friendship, but he was willing to give himself a break. Telling himself that it would take time to put feelings of love behind him. Gale may never have experienced what Katniss and Peeta had together, but that didn't mean what he felt for her wasn't real. He stood by listening to the people from the Capitol, Plutarch and his assistant Fulvia talk with Katniss about some sort of surprise they had in store for her. He watched as Katniss looked through a sketchbook, put his hand on her shoulder when he saw the tears slipping down her cheeks only to have her shrug it off, once again letting him know he was crossing the line into Peeta's territory. Gale could comfort her verbally, but physically was another story. That was another man's job whether or not that man was there with them. Gale wondered if these Capitol people were listening to themselves as they spoke to him and Katniss, how rude some of their comments came off and he hated them that much more. Not for their brainless commentary on Katniss' Mockingjay costume, but for being from the place that forced her into wearing it. The Capitol. As far as he was concerned, none of those people deserved sanctuary in Thirteen's safe haven. If they wanted to appease their guilty conscience by joining the rebellion, they could stay at the Capitol and work from there. The only person he didn't mind was Justus. The man had been turned into an Avox, something Gale learned about from Katniss after her first Games, and seeing him up close...learning what he had done in the Capitol to get the rebellion's efforts started, Gale was impressed. The guy looked into the face of Snow, withstood the torture he was dealt and still survived. Even now, he had no ability to speak, yet he communicated freely with his hands around his wife and was teaching the others how to speak using their hands too. Gale had gone into a few of the sign language classes but could never pick it up. He tried to learn the alphabet so he could spell words, yet no

matter how hard he tried, it didn't click. 'Oh well,' he thought to himself, 'it's not like Snow's going to cut my tongue out or anything.'

The morning turned out to be a complete waste of time in Gale's book. The surprise Plutarch talked about turned out to be Katniss' prep team who were located in an area of Thirteen Gale had been to several times. He didn't want to tell Katniss, but he was one of the soldiers that had brought her prep team deep into the underground facility for discipline. He had no idea they were still being held, he thought they'd get some form of punishment then be released, so seeing the trio of people cowering in the corner of the dank, cold room...their wounds, almost made Gale feel guilty. Almost. He reminded himself that these people were part of the reason his Catnip went into the arena to begin with. It took Gale by complete surprise when Katniss freaked out over their being held prisoner and shocked him even more when she refused to let them be seen by anyone other than her mother, Prim and Dr. Valero, another Capitol piece of work. She may have been Justus' wife, but Gale couldn't stand the woman. Since talking with Katniss in the closet Gale came to realize that it wasn't his fault she miscarried, it was this doctor's fault...the Capitol's fault. The Capitol for putting Katniss in this position to begin with and the doctor for not being honest with Katniss and telling her about the destruction of Twelve. If the woman had done that then Gale wouldn't have had to, and he *did* have to. That he was certain of. He waited while the prep team got worked on. Offered to go with Katniss when her doctor wanted to do a quick examination of her only to be shot down once again. This time, quite rudely in his book, but that was just Katniss being Katniss. While he stood around watching precious medical resources go to waste on the people from the Capitol, Gale spoke with Plutarch about getting the items needed to go hunting. It was obvious there would be no dressing up Katniss for the cameras today, so he might as well go hunting and take advantage of one of the conditions of her becoming their figurehead. A few calls were made and

everything was set in place. The second Katniss came out of the room with that doctor, Gale was ready to get her away from all of these people...these people that didn't give a damn about her and shoved her in the arena, and he'd take her to the woods where she could be herself for a little while. He hadn't expected to wait around after her doctor's visit for the status of her prep team, and it bugged the hell out of him at how much of her time...herself she was dedicating to them. They didn't deserve it.

"Guess we've all been put on notice," the sound of Katniss' voice behind him had Gale turning towards her.

"Pardon me?" Plutarch asked.

Katniss made a gesture with her chin towards her prep team, "Don't tell me you didn't get the message, Plutarch?" Everyone held Katniss' stare. "Punishing my prep team was a warning. Not just to me, but to you too," she spoke to Fulvia and Plutarch. "Coin is making it known she's in charge and Capitol resident or not...she's the one with the power."

Fulvia lifted her chin, "I think Plutarch and I are much more valuable than those three."

"Sure you are, but I was valuable too, wasn't I Plutarch?" Katniss asked. "Tributes are always valuable...until they're not."

Gale let out a little sniff and a smirk. He was sort of pleased that Coin was telling the people of the Capitol they didn't deserve any special privileges here. "You ready to go?" he asked Katniss.

"I want to find out how they are first," she leaned against one of the exam tables to wait it out.

"Who cares?" From the look on Katniss' face apparently she did. "I mean...we can find out later," Gale quickly covered.

"We'll find out now," Katniss gave him a curious stare then turned her attention to her mother and Prim who were heading their way.

"They'll be fine. They've been..." Evelyn pursed her lips, "...they've been beaten and starved, but we should be able to have them back on their feet in no time."

"When can they get back to work?" Plutarch asked and Katniss rolled her eyes towards Gale who thought, 'Wow, really care about their well being, huh?'

"Tomorrow would be the soonest," Evelyn answered.

Katniss handed Prim a book and said, "Hey, can you put this in my room for me?"

"Sure," Prim looked excited. "Are you going to use it?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She gave Prim's braid a little tug.

"Congratulations by the way. Dr. Valero told me the good news."

"Isn't it great, Katniss?" Prim smiled and Gale wondered what the good news was. "When Peeta gets here, he's going to be so excited."

"He always knew you'd be a doctor," Katniss gave Prim a kiss on the cheek. "I'm really happy for you Prim."

"Don't tell Bing. I want to tell him myself." Katniss pretended to lock her lips together at Prim's request. "See you later, Katniss." Prim lifted a hand to Gale. "Bye."

"Now, I'm ready to go," Katniss headed off with Gale.

"Did I hear you right?" Gale looked back over his shoulder at Prim who was talking to the green girl from Katniss' prep team. "Prim's going to be a doctor?"

"Uh huh. Dr. Valero is putting in the request for her to start medical training." Katniss grinned. "Effie really came through when she chose Dr. Valero for me."

"Effie?" Gale really had to find out about her. "What's this strange obsession you have with Effie Trinket?"

"There's no fixation. I love her."

Gale couldn't have been more shocked. "Look, I know she helped out with the rebellion and all, but...you *love* her?" He gave Katniss a strange look. "Seriously?"

Katniss stopped walking and said, "Yeah. Seriously. I love her and Peeta adores her so you better watch yourself when you talk about her."

Gale held up his hands, "Sorry. I didn't realize you two had such a bond with the woman who reaped you."

Katniss' nostrils flared. "She did not reap us. That was the Capitol."

"Yeah and she's one of them." Gale started walking again, heading for the area he knew held their bows so they could go hunting. "We going or what?"

"No. I don't think I want to go anywhere with you," Katniss shook her head.

"Fine. Then I'll go hunting by myself."

"Hunting?" Katniss followed him. "Now?"

"Yeah, now. What else are we supposed to do? It's not like you can be...beautified or anything," Gale said it with a mocking tone in his voice. "Or maybe you want to go to your room and start having silent conversations with Effie?"

"You don't have to be such a jerk you know." Katniss' crossed her arms over her chest as she stormed down the hall behind him.

"Yeah. *I'm* being the jerk," Gale said under his breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Katniss asked as though she had no clue.

"Nothing, Catnip. It doesn't mean a thing." Gale really didn't feel like getting into an argument with her in the middle of the hall. "Let's get our stuff and go hunting. I think we're both feeling a bit claustrophobic in here."

She didn't say a word to him, just stared him down until they were in the woods searching for game. "You knew my prep team was down there, didn't you?" Katniss asked him out of the blue.

Gale figured he'd have to explain sooner or later after the questioning look she gave to him in the elevator on the way down to where they were being held. He just hadn't worked up a decent excuse yet. "I...I didn't know they were *still* down there."

"Still?" Katniss stopped close to a tree. "How long did you know they were down there?"

Gale let out a breath and faced her, "I was ordered along with a couple of other guards to bring them there about five days ago."

"Five days!" Katniss' eyes grew huge with anger. "You brought my prep team there, and you didn't bother to tell me?"

He honestly didn't see the big deal. "What good would it have done? I mean...sure...they went a bit overboard with the punishment, but...Christ Catnip..." his eyes narrowed in accusation. "Why the hell do you care so much about these Capitol people?"

"Why *don't* you?" Katniss dropped her bow to her side. "They're people, Gale. Just like the rest of us. So the question is, why don't you care about them?"

"They're not people like the rest of us. They're..." Gale kicked at the dirt under his feet. "This is bull. You're actually defending those people? They dressed you up...paraded you around so you could go into the arena, and you're actually defending them?"

Katniss shook her head in disbelief. "They didn't know any better. My prep team did everything in their power to help me get out of that arena alive, Gale."

"Oh please," He rolled his head in disgust. "They put makeup on you and did your hair. Big whoop!"

"That is a big whoop out there," Katniss lowered her voice down. "Gale, you don't understand the way things work in the Capitol. The people out there are superficial so things like hair and makeup mean a lot. My prep team knew that, and they worked their fingers to the bone for me. They knew what I looked like had a lot to do with getting sponsors."

"You could've gotten them on your own," Gale was certain of it. "You didn't need to get all fancied up by a group of...freaks. Sponsors would've noticed you on their own."

"Because of the things Peeta said," Katniss gripped his wrist.

"Because of what those people did for me, I was turned into the Girl on Fire...one half of the Star Crossed Lovers and no...I couldn't have achieved that on my own." She dropped his wrist and took a few deep breaths. "They're decent people, Gale."

He had decided to drop the subject all together until she said that.

"Decent people!" He grabbed her by the upper arms and gave her a little shake. "Do you even know what you're saying? Who you're talking about? These people don't deserve a thing from you yet you stood down there in that cell and yelled...and...and screamed like they were holding...ME prisoner!"

Her voice was low, "You're hurting me, Gale." She just stood there unmoving until he finally let her go then she stopped speaking all together leaned up against a tree and said, "Let me try and wrap my mind around this for a second. You don't think my prep team deserves a thing from me...from anyone really, because they're from the Capitol. Right?"

"Yeah," Gale stormed in front of her, determined to make his point.

"Those people don't deserve a damn thing from you or me."

She gave her shoulder a little shrug. "What makes you so much better than them?"

"Because I know better than to do the things they've done," Gale said with defiance in his voice. "I know what's right and those people..."

"You know what's right," Katniss interrupted him. "And you know because...your parents taught you?"

"I guess. Yeah." He didn't know where she was going.

"Their parents taught them that the Games were right. That we were the enemy."

"They were wrong!" Gale yelled out loud enough to frighten a flock of birds out of some trees away in the distance.

"But they didn't think they were wrong. They were raised that way." Gale couldn't understand why she wasn't screaming at him...fighting with him like she always did before. If she felt that strongly than she would have fought with him about it, wouldn't she? "My God, Gale. Have you always been this way? Thought like this?" Katniss pushed away from the tree and turned towards him. "Have I?"

He gave her a devilish half grin, "Yeah. We're two of a kind, Catnip."

"No," she shook her head. "We're not. And if that's who I was...I'm ashamed of myself." She pointed towards the underground facility. "Those people...my prep team...they're human beings and just because they're from the Capitol doesn't make them any less deserving than you or I."

"You might want to go back to that doctor and get checked out, Katniss. I think your priorities got knocked out of whack along with the rest of you during your escape." Gale didn't mean to be such an ass, but he was pretty pissed off with her at the moment.

"You know...you think you're so much better than they are because you're from Twelve and you've been through sooooo much, but what makes you so different from the Gamemakers, or Snow for that matter? You're standing here judging people based on where they were born." Katniss threw her bow over her shoulder. "I think I'm done hunting for the day."

He could barely catch his breath at her accusations. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" He called to her.

"Told you. I'm done hunting."

"Maybe I'm not done hunting yet. I'm definitely not done with this conversation." Gale could feel his anger almost overflowing and still she didn't fight back.

"Say what you want to say so I can go home," She stood back with a disapproving look on her face.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Did these people suck all the life out of you or do you save that for meetings like this morning when Peeta and your precious Effie Trinket are in trouble?" He knew he was being cruel, but damn, he couldn't seem to get a rise out of her. "The girl I knew would never have stood up for a bunch of people that put her in the arena, and she sure as hell wouldn't have based her decision on becoming the leader of the rebellion based on the rescue of some woman from the Capitol! I mean...GEEZ! EFFIE TRINKET!?"

"Watch what you say about that woman," Katniss' voice was low and threatening. "She was good enough for you when she sent medication for your back...she risked her life to get supplies for our district...she's done nothing but put herself in danger since Peeta and I entered the arena, so you better tread very...very carefully when you talk about her, Gale. That woman is like a mother to Peeta and I won't let you badmouth her or make light of the things she's done."

"Fine! She's risked more than most from the Capitol, but honestly Catnip...who gives a shit?" Gale lowered his voice down. "You used to put me first...your family first."

Katniss took slow and precise steps towards Gale, looked him square in the eyes and said, "Effie Trinket *is* my family. She's Peeta's family. You want to throw insults around about my prep team...Plutarch...go right ahead...I can ignore those, but I cannot ignore any disparaging remarks about Effie." She started for home once again then turned and left Gale with one last thing to mull over. "Don't make me regret my choice to have you by my side while Peeta's gone, and do not make me choose between you and Effie Trinket."

Gale slammed the door to his quarters the moment he walked into them thinking, 'Who the hell does she think she is comparing me to President Snow? And what the hell kind of threat was that...making her choose between me and Effie?' Gale let out a loud grunt. 'There is something wrong with her. There has to be. It's like she's messed up in the head. Walking around talking to Peeta like he can hear her or something and sticking up for these...losers from the Capitol like they actually give a shit about her.' He opened up his closet and dug through the pockets of the clothes he was wearing when they were rescued from District Twelve and found what he was looking for. He felt the silky material in his hands and remembered Prim saying something about Katniss being spoiled. 'If she's wearing underwear like this, she probably is spoiled,' Gale thought as he looked at the delicate orange garments in his hand. He knew he should have given them back to her, but what was he going to do hand them over and say, "here I was holding your underwear for you?" He looked at his watch, shoved the garments back in his old clothes pocket and got ready for dinner. 'I don't know who you are anymore Catnip, but I'm going to do everything I can to help you remember where you came from and that I'm right about these people from the Capitol,' he silently vowed as he headed to the dining hall for the special meeting Coin was holding during Reflection.

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Suspensions began going through her mind weeks ago when Gale joined the rebellion. She put them to rest after talking things through with him, but then questions began to arise within Katniss again. His reaction to her prep team's location didn't seem to come as a surprise nor did he seem concerned about their well-being. If anything Gale seemed to be happy her prep team had been beaten, and this was cause for concern for Katniss. She tried to ignore his rude comments about them, told herself he had the right to feel that way considering his district was firebombed, but it was her district too, and she went through the Games, not Gale. As they made their way stealthily through the woods of Thirteen Katniss couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that had been plaguing her since they came upon her pets. "You knew my prep team was down there, didn't you?" Katniss had to find out the truth.

"I...I didn't know they were *still* down there."

"Still?" Now she was certain he knew more than he was letting on.

"How long did you know they were down there?"

"I was ordered along with a couple of other guards to bring them there about five days ago." The look on Gale's face almost read like pride to Katniss.

"Five days!" Katniss was furious. "You brought my prep team there and you didn't bother to tell me?"

Gale just blew it off like it was no big deal, but to Katniss it was. "What good would it have done? I mean...sure...they went a bit overboard with the punishment, but...Christ Catnip..." his eyes narrowed in accusation. "Why the hell do you care so much about these Capitol people?"

"Why *don't* you?" She thought for sure that Gale would take pity on those less fortunate, and considering their predicament, her prep team was almost like an endangered species. "They're people, Gale. Just like the rest of us. So the question is, why don't you care about them?"

"They're not people like the rest of us. They're... This is bull. You're actually defending those people? They dressed you up...paraded you around so you could go into the arena, and you're actually defending them?"

Katniss shook her head in disbelief. "They didn't know any better. My prep team did everything in their power to help me get out of that arena alive, Gale."

"Oh please," his voice was dripping with disgust. "They put makeup on you and did your hair. Big whoop!"

"That is a big whoop out there." As much as she wanted to scream and yell, she had to keep her temper under control. She took one deep cleansing breath and attempted to explain things to him, "Gale, you don't understand the way things work in the Capitol. The people out there are superficial so things like hair and makeup mean a lot. My prep team knew that and they worked their fingers to the bone for me. They knew what I looked like had a lot to do with getting sponsors."

"You could've gotten them on your own. You didn't need to get all fancied up by a group of...freaks. Sponsors would've noticed you on their own."

"Because of the things Peeta said," Katniss held onto his wrist. She had to make him understand. "Because of what those people did for me, I was turned into the Girl on Fire...one half of the Star Crossed Lovers and no...I couldn't have achieved that on my own." She told herself to calm down. 'This isn't good for the baby so keep it together.' A few more deep breaths. "They're decent people, Gale."

"Decent people!" The force of Gale's hands gripping her upper arms took her by complete surprise. They both had tempers, she had seen his many times over the years and was shocked that they hadn't come to blows during the course of their friendship, but he had never actually hurt her...until now. "Do you even know what you're saying? Who you're talking about? These people don't deserve a thing from you yet you stood down there in that cell and yelled...and...and screamed like they were holding...ME prisoner!"

"You're hurting me, Gale." No matter how many times she and Peeta had fought, and their fights were pretty vocal, he had never laid a hand on her. Not in the manor Gale had just done. She tried to put it out of her mind by telling herself that he was upset, but his comments about her prep team...the people from the Capitol in general, left her feeling uneasy. "Let me try and wrap my mind around this for a second. You don't think my prep team deserves a thing from me...from anyone really, because they're from the Capitol. Right?"

"Yeah," Gale stood his ground in front of her, and Katniss knew it was an act of intimidation. "Those people don't deserve a damn thing from you or me."

It was a horrible conclusion she was coming to as she asked him, "What makes you so much better than them?"

"Because I know better than to do the things they've done. I know what's right and those people..."

"You know what's right," Katniss stopped him from speaking in order to get her point across. "And you know because...your parents taught you?"

"I guess. Yeah."

Whether Gale knew it or not, he was helping her to see things much clearer. "Their parents taught them that the Games were right. That we were the enemy."

"They were wrong!" Gale screamed at her and startled a flock of birds, but not Katniss.

"But they didn't think they were wrong. They were raised that way." Peeta had once told her that people shouldn't be judged because of where they were born, and Katniss realized that's exactly what Gale was doing...what she had done her entire life. "My God, Gale. Have you always been this way? Thought like this?" Katniss pushed away from the tree she was leaning on and faced Gale. "Have I?"

"Yeah. We're two of a kind, Catnip." The smile on Gale's face made her stomach turn.

"No," she shook her head. "We're not. And if that's who I was...I'm ashamed of myself. Those people...my prep team...they're human beings and just because they're from the Capitol doesn't make them any less deserving than you or I."

"You might want to go back to that doctor and get checked out, Katniss. I think your priorities got knocked out of whack along with the rest of you during your escape."

She wondered where the boy was she had grown up with. He looked identical to the young man she had spent her life hunting with, but the

man standing in the woods with her now was so filled with hatred he couldn't see past it. All he could do was group together the people from the Capitol in with Snow, but Katniss knew better. She knew what they had risked for her and Peeta. Gale knew too, but still he chose to overlook it. "You know...you think you're so much better than they are because you're from Twelve and you've been through sooooo much, but what makes you so different from the Gamemakers, or Snow for that matter? You're standing here judging people based on where they were born." Katniss threw her bow over her shoulder. "I think I'm done hunting for the day."

Gale's voice called to her. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

She had to get away from him and do some thinking. Serious thinking about the man she thought she could trust. Regina had warned her not to tell him about the baby still being alive. Katniss thought it was to protect him, but now she wasn't sure. Did Regina see something in Gale that Katniss was blind to? "Told you. I'm done hunting."

For some reason Gale continued to pester her, almost like he wanted to fight with her. "Maybe I'm not done hunting yet. I'm definitely not done with this conversation."

"Say what you want to say so I can go home." Katniss couldn't rise to his bait no matter how much she wanted to. One of them had to act like a grown up and it was obviously not going to be Gale.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Did these people suck all the life out of you or do you save that for meetings like this morning when Peeta and your precious Effie Trinket are in trouble?" Gale stood right in front of her. "The girl I knew would never have stood up for a bunch of people that put her in the arena, and she sure as hell wouldn't have based her decision on becoming the leader of the rebellion based on

the rescue of some woman from the Capitol! I mean...GEEZ! EFFIE TRINKET!?"

"Watch what you say about that woman," Katniss' voice was low and threatening. Now, he was crossing a line. "She was good enough for you when she sent medication for your back...she risked her life to get supplies for our district...she's done nothing but put herself in danger since Peeta and I entered the arena, so you better tread very...very carefully when you talk about her, Gale." If there was anyone from the Capitol that Gale should be grateful for it was Effie. "That woman is like a mother to Peeta and I won't let you badmouth her or make light of the things she's done."

"Fine! She's risked more than most from the Capitol, but honestly Catnip...who gives a shit?" Gale lowered his voice down. "You used to put me first...your family first."

She couldn't argue with him on that one. "Effie Trinket *is* my family. She's Peeta's family. You want to throw insults around about my prep team...Plutarch...go right ahead...I can ignore those, but I cannot ignore any disparaging remarks about Effie." She had been more of a mother to Peeta in one year than his own mother had been his entire life. For that reason alone, Effie Trinket had become blood. "Don't make me regret my choice to have you by my side while Peeta's gone, and do not make me choose between you and Effie Trinket." In the back of Katniss' mind she was thinking, 'As much as it pains me, I'd choose Effie, Gale. I'd choose Peeta's mother.' She could hear him screaming at her as she headed for the underground facility of Thirteen. Knew he was behind her, he had no choice but to follow her, he wasn't allowed to stay outside without her, but she kept her distance and surprisingly her cool.

"I need your bow," Gale snapped at her.

Katniss handed it to him without saying a word and went to her quarters to find her father in law packing up her things for her. "Pops? What are you doing?"

"They said they were moving us to the upper level and I didn't want them coming in here and finding some of your..." he gave her a little grin, "...contraband."

"Oh," Katniss always felt a sense of peace when she was around her father in law. "Thanks. Let me give you a hand with that stuff." She walked to the spot in the floor where she hid the pencils for Peeta.

"Got 'em," Bing told her. "Got all of that stuff. Everything left is pretty much the basics they provided you with when you moved in here."

"Thanks." Katniss followed her father in law up the stairs to their new quarters. "I appreciate you not taking the elevator. They make me feel trapped."

"Not a problem," Bing opened the door to her new quarters up for her to enter. "Looks like you're going to have to find a new way of getting into your mom's place at night." He set the box of Katniss' things down on a counter. "The ducts are in the floor on this level."

Katniss gave him a strange look, "You know about that?"

"Yup. Your mom told me."

"She knows?"

"Knows more than you give her credit for," Bing started looking around for loose tiles to hide the pencils. "Found one." He shoved the pencils inside and placed the tile back in place. "How was hunting with Gale?"

"How do you know I went hunting with Gale?" Katniss had been sitting on a chair staring off into space thinking about that very thing when he asked.

"Kitchen staff was told you'd be bringing in some meat." Bing pulled out a few drawers until he found one that was large enough to hold the stash of paper Katniss had pilfered. "Since you look like you've got the whole world weighing down on your shoulders right now and no game, I'm guessing things didn't go the way you wanted."

"You're just as bad as your son, you know that?" Katniss bit her bottom lip. "Can't hide a damn thing from you."

"Nope," he walked over to her and took her hand. "You can try to keep a secret, but...you're not too good when it comes to lying to the ones you love, and like it or not, you love me."

It was the first time in hours Katniss genuinely smiled. "Like I said, you're just like your son...arrogant." 'How long will I be able to keep the ultimate secret from this man,' she wondered? 'As long as you have to in order to save the life of the people you love.'

"Not arrogant. A little cocky maybe," he took a seat next to her. "Feel like talking before the mandatory meeting in the dining hall?"

She needed to figure some things out, but pulling her father in law into the mess he was determined to stay out of was the last thing she wanted to do. "It's rebellion stuff."

"So it's got nothing to do with Gale?"

"No, it has plenty to do with Gale," Katniss answered. "Gale and the rebellion." She chewed away at her lip then started to work on one of

her fingernails. "Pops? How do you feel about the rebels from the Capitol?"

"Don't really know them so I can't say I have many feelings towards them one way or another." He gave it a little thought, "Suppose I'm happy to have them on our side. It's good to know that not everyone out there thinks the way Snow does."

"There," Katniss stood up, "That's my point. They're not all alike."

"Of course not. That would be like them saying because we're from District Twelve we should all be punished for the things our ancestors did."

There was one person she was curious about. "How do you feel about Effie?"

"Now that woman I've got lots of opinions about," Bing leaned back in his chair. "Never really got to know her, but I know my son loves her and she loves my son the way he deserved to be loved by his mother his whole life. Risked a lot for the people of our district too. In my opinion, they don't make 'em much better than Effie Trinket."

If Peeta's father could feel that way, than why couldn't Gale? "Pops, Peeta isn't a traitor you know."

"Never thought he was."

"No," Katniss took his hand in hers. "You'd never think that way." She told him about the message Peeta had sent to her and saw his eyes fill with tears. "Pretty smart, huh?"

"Either that or crazy." He got up and held his arm out to her. "Walk you down to the dining hall?"

"That would be great." Katniss entered and saw Gale waiting just inside the door for her. She still wasn't sure how to help him understand about the people from the Capitol that risked so much for her, wasn't sure he'd ever open his mind enough to see her way of thinking, but his hatred had been deeply rooted toward the Capitol since birth and she had to help him see. "Waiting for me?" She asked Gale.

"Yeah." Gale lifted a chin in greeting for Bing. "Nice to see you again. Mrs. Everdeen and Prim are over there," Gale pointed them out.

"See you two later."

"We still fighting?" Gale asked her.

"Why don't we just say that we agree to disagree when it comes to the topic of the people from the Capitol?" Katniss suggested. She needed to get through the night...through this meeting that would prove Peeta's innocence to the people she was currently living amongst.

"Katniss?" Finnick grabbed her hand. "Why are we meeting here?"

Her heart broke for Finnick Odair. The man she had thought was such a ladies man, turned out to be so in love with Annie Cresta, he was on the verge of lunacy. "Remember the meeting this morning, Finnick? I agreed to be the Mockingjay and Coin saw that Peeta wasn't a traitor. She was supposed to promise immunity for all the tributes that were captured by the Capitol, but now that she knows Peeta wasn't spewing a bunch of treasonous lies..." Katniss gave his hand a little pat. "I'm sure she's going to fill everyone in on their innocence."

"Oh, good. I'm worried though...with Annie...what if she says something that might be construed as traitorous?"

"Don't worry, Finnick. I made her promise to pardon anyone while being held prisoner of the Capitol. Annie will be fine." Katniss wondered though, would Coin still hold up her part of the bargain to pardon everyone if needed?

Coin stood atop a small stage in front of a tiny microphone and began. "Attention." It only took her one time to get the crowd under control. "I'm pleased to announce that Katniss Ev...Mellark has agreed to be our Mockingjay with..." the crowd began to cheer and Katniss shrunk between Finnick and Gale in an attempt to hide herself. "However," Coin said loudly to regain control of the meeting, "Mrs. Mellark will only be our Mockingjay provided the other victors be granted full pardons." Coin began listing them off by name from a list and finished with, "Peeta Mellark and Effie Trinket."

The vast majority of the crowd began to hiss their disapproval. "She should be showing them the recording of Peeta during the interview...letting them know he's not a traitor," Katniss whispered to Gale who just shrugged a shoulder at her.

Coin sought out Katniss and held her stare, "In return for those unprecedented requests, Soldier Mellark has promised to devote herself to our cause. It follows that any deviance from her mission, in either motive or deed, will be viewed as a break in this agreement. The immunity would be terminated and the fate of the victors determined by the laws of District Thirteen. As would her own." There was a small semblance of a smile on the woman's face before she said, "Thank you," and walked off the stage.

"Wait a minute," Katniss tried to make her way through the crowd towards Coin who was ushered out of the dining hall by armed guards. "What the hell was that?" Katniss turned to face Gale.

"I...I don't know," even he had a look of shock on his face. "Thought for sure she'd tell people about Peeta being the Jabberjay. Maybe she's afraid the traitor will pass on the news or something."

Katniss knew that wasn't the case at all. She looked around the room until she found Haymitch looking back at her. His eyes filled with sorrow. Justus and Regina stared at her with pity and the rest of the room, a mixture of hope and disappointment. Yes, Katniss knew exactly what Coin had in mind when she was making her speech to the people in this district. The woman put in the order to kill her baby and now she was telling Katniss she had no problem doing the same to Peeta, Effie, the rest of the victors as well as Katniss herself. She pushed through the crowd, ignoring the stares and pats of congratulations from the people of District Twelve, towards her mentor and Plutarch. "Take it you understood our fearless leader's message to me?" Katniss practically growled. They had been having a power struggle since Katniss agreed to her position as the Mockingjay. "Why didn't she tell them about Peeta's innocence? Why didn't she..."

The sound of water splashing began to come from somewhere near followed up by a familiar voice with a Capitol accent. "Can you hear me? Oh, I certainly hope you can."

Katniss tried to figure out where the sound of water was coming from. Plutarch held the computer he was holding in the center of their group. She had no clue what was happening until Haymitch said one word, "Trinkie."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 6: Drinking Me Lonely, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Five: Drinking Me Lonely

There are many things happening across Panem. Katniss is getting accustomed to her new position as Mockingjay. Peeta is being put through hell on a daily basis. Effie is doing her best to play double agent, and Haymitch is finding out that life isn't easy without his nag by his side. Gale's true colors are beginning to show, and this is posing a problem for his lifelong friend.

This chapter started off with a little musical inspiration. Chris Young sings a haunting ballad titled Drinking Me Lonely which

came up on my random playlist. Hence, Haymitch's section in this chapter. So thank you Chris Young!

Thank you to all of you who take the time out of your busy life to read this story. Those of you who review, thank you! I am humbled by your kind words.

S and A, I am nothing without you both. You give of your time, your brains, your humor and your friendship. Thank you both!

Let's all travel into the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take a shower?" Effie entered her quarters with her personal Peacekeeper searching each and every room.

"Residence is secure," Steven spoke into his wristband then addressed Effie. "Miss. Trinket, I'll be taking my break now. You'll have guards posted at each entrance, walking the grounds and one will be inside with you at all times."

Effie waved him off and headed for her private bedroom. "Good night, Mr. Tanner."

"I'll be back in three and a half hours," he informed her before allowing another guard into her quarters and talking quietly to him.

'Three and a half hours,' Effie thought to herself. 'I'll need to move quickly if I want to explore the corridors that led towards the prisoners.' She'd have to get as much information about it as possible before reporting to Haymitch and the rest of the rebels. Fifteen minutes is what she gave herself before walking into the main area of her residency to meet the replacement Peacekeeper. "Good evening."

"Ma'am," the guard had been standing in the center of her living room scanning his surroundings.

"I was planning on having a cup of tea before I bathe and turn in for the evening." Effie poured it herself. "Would you like one? We have plenty of food and drink," she offered noticing the guard's eyes constantly drifting towards the table laden with an overabundance of food. "If you don't eat it, it shall all go to waste."

"I'm not allowed to..."

The lack of Capitol accent, his eyes continually floating towards the sweets and his constant slumping of the shoulders told Effie all she needed to know about her temporary guard. He was from District Two. "Oh, pish posh. Who will be the wiser?" Effie made him up a plate full of sweets hoping the sugar rush would come crashing down on him. "Please," she gave him a tiny smile as she offered him the plate. "Your secret is safe with me. Tea?"

The guard took the plate from her hands and began to eat as though he had never had an ounce of sugar in his life. "Tea would be nice. Thank you."

"My pleasure," Effie wished to high heaven she had some of that sleep syrup Katniss had used on Peeta in the first arena. Sleep syrup may not have been at the ready, but she did have brandy. "I shall make you my special blend."

"Thank you Miss. Trinket."

"Of course," Effie poured a small amount of blackberry brandy into a cup and filled it with steaming hot black tea. "Do you like it sweetened?"

"Yes, please."

She dawdled for a few moments, refilled the guard's plate twice and his cup of tea three times. "It's quite lovely having someone decent to care for," she took his cup and noticed the droopy lids covering his eyes. "Well, I do have a busy morning ahead of me. Please feel free to make yourself at home," she gestured to an oversized rocker stuffed with luxurious padding. "You Peacekeepers work so hard and I barely see you take a break. I promise I shall be no troubles whatsoever. A bath and sleep," she grinned as she watched the guard sit in the rocker and begin to push it back and forth. 'Sleep well,' she thought to herself as she entered her quarters and moved the portrait of President Snow to the side. There was only one button and she wasn't sure how to get out of the hallway Mr. Tanner had taken her into once she made her way inside, so she grabbed a pillow and placed it in the wall preventing it from closing with her inside. With shoeless feet, she headed straight for the area she had heard Johanna's voice coming from, but there was nothing but silence. "Where are you?" She whispered to herself as she scanned the dark tunnels. One led to a doorway, a television monitor located in the wall next to the door, showed what was on the other side. "Peeta," she whispered. Effie had found the jail cells where the prisoners had been taken. He was curled up in the fetal position and shivering. If she could, she would have broken through the door and taken him from his locked cell. 'Stay on track, Effie,' she reminded herself she was there for a reason. To get information so Haymitch could rescue them. There were ten cells squeezed into a space no bigger than her bathroom. Three held Johanna, Peeta and Annie who was rocking back and forth and silently crying. 'Oh darling,' Effie sent the girl a mental bit of hope, 'it won't be long. Stay strong. All of you, stay strong.' Four other cells were taken, but one prisoner wasn't moving. His eyes were open and had a fixed look about them. Effie gasped as she realized that the mentor from District Six was lying dead on the floor of his cell. Under

his head a bloody puddle. Her fingers covered her lips as she headed down another corridor. The twists and turns of the halls finally led to two additional doors. The television monitoring system showed a room, which Effie recognized as the meeting room next to the President's main office. The other television screen showed President Snow sitting behind his large desk, rubbing at his temple, watching the war unfold before his eyes on yet another television screen. 'Seems I hit a bit of a jackpot,' a flicker of hope flashed through her eyes. When the president turned around and started to speak to someone Effie tried to make out who it was, but the person was out of view, and then... her fingers flew to her lips, "Orange blossom," she whispered. The rebel's traitor was right before her eyes, and now Effie understood why the information being passed about was minimal. She had to tell Haymitch, had to let the rebels know what was going on. Most importantly, she had to find a way to get rid of the traitor. Orange blossom knew Effie Trinket was part of the rebellion. She wished she had more time, but it was not on her side. She did her best to hurry back into her bedroom, stuck her arm through the opening of the wall in an attempt to open it back up, but that was all that would fit. The pillow hadn't been nearly firm enough to keep it open wide enough for her to slip back through. She berated herself for being so stupid, 'What were you thinking? You should have used a book...a candlestick...A pillow?' The television monitor in the wall showed her empty bedroom. Her eyes began to scan the area, looking for a way to get back in. There was no button in sight. No way of reentering her quarters. 'Oh my,' she worried. She pushed on the wall only to find that it wouldn't budge. 'Okay, think Effie. Think.' She closed her eyes and thought of her exit from the hallway with Steven. Her tiny pace helped her to focus on her task at hand. What did Mr. Tanner do to get the wall to slide open? Did he touch something? Her eyes flickered to the television monitor she hadn't noticed upon reentering her quarters earlier. Effie looked at the monitor thinking, 'Surely it can't be that

simple,' but it was. A push of the power button and she was back inside of her bedroom. She threw the pillow onto a chair, rushed into the bathroom and ran the shower. 'Please be there. Please be there.' Her head was going a mile a minute as she stripped down to nothing, held the computer in her hand and stood as far away from the splashing water as possible. Plutarch had said the device could withstand almost anything, Effie could only hope the slight sprays of water wasn't one of the things the tiny computer couldn't handle. She swirled her finger counterclockwise over the area Plutarch had told her about, stuck her head out of the shower to make sure she was still alone, then began speaking into it. "Can you hear me? Oh, I certainly hope you can. Haymitch, we are more than ready for you to make your appearance," she kept her voice down and her lips as close to the computer as possible. "I have found a way to get access to the prisoners through the quarters they are keeping me in adjacent to the president's rose garden. It not only leads to the jail cells, but to a conference room, the president's private office, and the Tribute Center as well. There were too many hallways for me to go through without being caught, but I was led to believe that there is one tunnel that leads to Snow's residency. I fear we are now down to six prisoners of war being held captive and Peeta is not faring well. None of us are." She wasn't sure when the rebels could make their way into the Capitol, if she'd even be alive for much longer, but she had an idea. "We are having a meeting in two days time to discuss an attack against those of you that have taken shelter in Thirteen. All of the officials will be there, as well as President Snow. The security will be ungodly around his offices, but the private residencies are usually left with only one or two guards. If you are willing to brave this, then I will use your computerized system to disable their television coverage of the war like you asked me to Plutarch. In fact, I shall do it immediately. Please...please do not leave us here any longer. The traitor is here, and knows who I am...that I have been a part of the rebellion since the

Victory Tour. All of our lives are in danger and my boy...my sweet boy...They are slowly poisoning Peeta and..."

"Miss Trinket," the knock on her shower door startled her.

"Yes," she called out.

"You'll need to come out of there."

"I shall finish up promptly." Effie blew out a breath. "Oh, Haymitch. I fear they may have caught me this time." The pounding on the door grew louder. "Please darling, hurry. And if I don't make it out the traitor is...I..."

"Miss. Trinket," Steven Tanner's voice spoke to her from inside of her washroom.

"Mr. Tanner! Please leave this instant! This is not proper etiquette!"

"You'll have to come with me ma'am," Mr. Tanner stood with his back to the shower. "I won't look, but you'll need to step out of the shower immediately ma'am."

It took careful precision to manipulate the buttons on the computer, reach for her clothing, dry herself off and secure Plutarch's device back into her corset after getting dressed without Steven Tanner seeing. "Where are we going?" Effie tugged on her wig which was slightly lopsided.

"This way Miss. Trinket," she entered her living room to see President Snow waiting for her arrival, and knew her days as a double agent were up.

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"Trinkie." There was a tremble in Haymitch's voice as he called her by the pet name she hated so much. "Plutarch, we need to go somewhere quiet," Haymitch suggested.

Plutarch, Katniss, Haymitch and Fulvia entered the hallway outside of the dining hall and listened as Effie pleaded for the lives of those being held captive. "Oh, Haymitch. I fear they may have caught me this time." The pounding on the door grew louder. "Please darling, hurry. And if I don't make it out the traitor is...I..."

"What was that?" Katniss said softly when they heard a pounding sound.

"Someone's there," Haymitch leaned closer to the computer and feared for Effie's safety.

A few words were spoken between Effie and someone that had entered the room she was in, then the computer went dead. The group shared concerned looks.

"At least we know the traitor is not here with us," Plutarch attempted to help ease the worry on Katniss' and Haymitch's faces.

"No. They're there and probably ratted Effie out." Haymitch pounded his fist into the wall. "Damn it, Effie! Why the hell do you always have to be the hero?" His head dropped as he tried to regain his

composure. "Okay, we need to let Coin know about this. Time to get our people out of there and we're not waiting two days!"

"Hey, Catnip?" Gale peeked his head out of the dining hall. "Your family's been looking for you...you alright?"

Katniss took a few deep breaths. The combination of fear, the stench of whatever they were serving for dinner and her rapidly beating heart was causing her stomach to churn in a way that was all too familiar. "Yeah."

"Might as well bring him in on it sweetheart. He's gonna find out anyway," Haymitch motioned for Gale to join them as they headed for the control room. "We've got to get a rescue mission going, and now. Our people are in a world of danger."

"Didn't we know that already?" Gale asked sarcastically.

"This is serious, Gale." Katniss could feel the horrible churning start in her gut. "I...I need to meet you there." She ran ahead of them without saying another word, heading for the nearest bathroom, begging herself to hold on. 'Please don't do this banana nut. Mommy needs to work. Oh God...mommy,' she pushed open the door to a closet and grabbed a trashcan, bent over it and let out whatever was in her stomach. She wasn't sure how long she sat on the closet's cold floor holding her stomach, wishing she had a glass of iced water to sip on, wishing Peeta was there to hold her hair back and rub that spot between her shoulder blades making things bearable. "I can't do this," her lips moved as she talked to him. "How am I supposed to hide this, Peeta? Prim guessed and I couldn't keep it from her. Bing said I couldn't keep a secret from him or mom. What if they know? How am I going to keep this baby alive if I have to go into battle?"

"Katniss?" A soft rap on the closet door followed by Prim's voice called to her. "I'm coming in."

Katniss lifted her bloodshot eyes to Prim who immediately went into doctor mode. "First thing's first. We need to get that trash can out of here before the smell makes you puke again." Prim opened the door, disappeared for a couple of minutes then returned with a cup of something. "Sip this."

"What is it?"

"Water," Prim lifted it to her sister's lips. "Take little sips. You look weak. Are you okay? Can you stand?"

"Yeah, it's just been awhile since I've dealt with the morning sickness." Katniss rested her head against the wall. "How am I going to do this, Prim?"

"The same way you did it in the arena," She held her hand out to Katniss. "Come on. You'll want to eat now, right?"

"I have to go to a meeting in the control room about rescuing Peeta," Katniss took a few deep breaths.

Prim thought for a few seconds then said, "Okay. I'll have Dr. Valero put in an order for your food to be brought to you." She put her arm around Katniss' waist. "Did something bring it on? The smell of some food?"

"Yeah, I called myself mommy," Katniss gave her sister a halfhearted grin.

"That'll do it," Prim smiled back. "Drink the rest of this water. Stop by the restroom on your way to the meeting, and clean yourself up. You

stink. In the meantime I'll talk to Dr. Valero and we'll send you in some food and something soothing for your stomach."

"No," Katniss shook her head. "Don't worry about the medicine. Now that I've gotten it out of my system, I'll be fine until I'm ready to eat again. We need to save the medication for when I really need it."

"Okay, but just in case, I'll talk to Dr. Valero about it." Prim walked a few feet away from Katniss, "You're hunting again, right?"

"Yeah," Katniss nodded.

"Good. Take me with you the next time so I can forage for some medicinal herbs. They don't grow anything like that here, don't think they even know what to look for in the woods, but I can brew up some tea that will help you with this. It won't get rid of it completely, but it should help." Prim walked away without getting an approval or disapproval from her sister.

"Great, Coin will love that." Katniss walked into the meeting where they were dissecting Effie's description of the corridors in the Capitol.

"If we can get to this place she's staying at," Haymitch was pacing back and forth, "we might stand a chance of getting to the prisoners."

"But how?" Gale asked. "It's not like we can land a hovercraft in the middle of the president's rose garden."

"The Tribute Center roof," Katniss interjected. "She said it led to the Tribute Center. Plutarch, you disabled the surveillance and there are no tributes for them to keep an eye on, so the feeds on the roof won't exactly be a priority for them."

"I see what you're saying sweetheart," Haymitch looked up at a map of the Capitol that was displayed on a large television monitor. "If we can get our people here, make it down to the tunnels, we can reach all of them and get them out the same way."

"They'll never even know we were around the president's offices," Gale looked intently at the map. "We might be able to take a few hostages in the process...grab a hold of some officials. See how Snow would like that."

"He wouldn't give a damn," Katniss sat down before her legs gave out. Prim was right. She was feeling just like she looked...weak. "As far as he's concerned, all of his people are dispensable." 'Sort of like Coin,' she thought to herself. "They've accepted a position with the Capitol...knew what they were risking..." she turned her head towards the president, "...I'm sure he'll remember their sacrifice."

"The girl's right," Haymitch either didn't get Katniss' sarcastic comment or disregarded it. "Snow could care less about his people. We need to go in, get ours and get the hell out."

"If we could use this opportunity to gain some type of edge over the Capitol, then we should," Gale argued.

"No!" Haymitch slapped his hand against the table. "We need to prioritize here. That's where we screwed up when we were getting them out of the arena. We tried to do too much at once. We should've listened to Effie when she told us to use the other hovercrafts as cover, grab the rebels and get out. Instead we were trying to get supplies...take out their entire communications network. We barely made it out of there."

"I agree with Haymitch on that," Plutarch added. "If we had stuck to the original plan instead of changing it at the last minute, we would have gotten all of the tributes out."

"Stop calling them tributes," Haymitch said in a low voice. "They're people, not tributes."

"We can't go back in time," Coin's face was stone, "and change the outcome of the rescue mission. Our adjusting of the plans was beneficial and provided us with a slight advantage over the Capitol. District Four gained control over communications within hours of our attack on the Capitol's systems."

"District Four would've gotten control over it anyway," Haymitch's entire face was starting to turn beet red. "It needs to be decided now. Is this a rescue mission or is this an attack?"

"It's a rescue mission," Katniss said flatly. "That is what was promised to me." she let her eyes drift up to Coin's.

"A rescue mission," Coin gave her head a nod. "However, I want to know who the traitor is, and I'd like the person brought here if possible."

"As long as it doesn't risk the lives of the people we're trying to save, I have no problem with that," Katniss could smell the food being delivered to her before it even entered the room. Her mouth began to water as a knock came at the door and Regina entered with a tray.

"How do we know which way to go once you get access to that area Effie told us about?"

"Excuse me for disturbing your meeting, but Katniss needs to keep her strength up if she's going to be fulfilling her role as our

Mockingjay." Dr. Valero set the tray down in front of Katniss, signed a few things to Justus and said, "He'd like me to translate for him."

"Proceed," Coin eyed up Katniss' doctor.

Regina began translating Justus' hand signals. "I know a lot about the tunnels. They were the inspiration for the Capitol hideout I built as well as the escape routes in the districts." Everyone listened as Regina spoke for Justus as he explained the origin of them, and how they were being used by the Capitol when he still worked for them. When he was finished Regina calmly excused herself. "Have a good evening."

Everyone in the room gave Katniss and her heaping tray of food she had ignored during Justus' lesson a once over. "They still have us residents from Twelve on a higher calorie diet," she tried to play her enormous portions off. As Katniss dove into the soup that had been served for dinner that night she took a huge bite of bread thinking, 'Peeta, you need to hurry up and get here. I'm not going to be able to keep these people fooled for much longer.'

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A one by one inch device was placed on Peeta's arm, and the tubes shot into his skin. He took in a sharp breath between his teeth and waited for everything to change. He started to see images the night

before that had frightened him to no end. Katniss' body burned to a crisp surrounded by a glowing light. His mother, Effie's body lying dead in a pool of her own blood, her throat slit open. 'She's not your mother,' something in the back of his mind was struggling to get a grip on reality. 'Effie Trinket is not your mother. Your mother is dead,' but was she? Snow had told him his entire family died in the bombings of District Twelve. Bombs that Katniss was supposedly responsible for, but he also called Effie his mother. 'Why would he do that?' Peeta wondered. 'Effie's from the Capitol. Am I...am I from the Capitol too?' Questions continued to arise within him. 'Did I live in District Twelve? Yes. I know I did. I remember being reaped. Reaped by...Effie. Approached by Haymitch to help...help what?' Peeta took a breath, closed his eyes, and tried to recall who these people were to him. He could hear Effie telling him to fight what Snow was doing to him. Not to admit to being part of the rebellion. 'The rebellion,' Peeta's eyes flew open. 'Haymitch wanted me to join the rebellion.'

"Good morning, Peeta," President Snow's voice sent a chill up his spine. "I have a special treat for you today." He made a motion with his hand and Peeta watched as the room he had killed three Peacekeepers in the day before appeared behind a wall of glass. "Do you recognize our prisoner?"

Peeta's head was fuzzy...dizzy, but he knew who was on the other side of the wall. "Please don't do this. I don't know what you want from me. I don't know about the rebellion. I was never a member."

President Snow's demented features took on one of anger and hostility. "This has nothing to do with the rebellion, and everything to do with yesterday's attempt on my life. You took three of my guards, but I am being kind and only taking one life in return. Correction. One very important life. This person is important to you, am I correct, Peeta?"

"No." He tried to turn his head but it was strapped down to the table.
"No!" He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Then why so emotional over the death of someone so...insignificant?"

"What do you want?" Peeta looked at Snow. "You want me to forget Katniss? Hate her? Well, don't worry...your drugs are doing that. I can barely think about her without wanting to strangle her."

"No, Peeta. I want to show you what happens when you don't play by my rules." Snow walked around the back of the table Peeta was strapped to. "What should have happened to you in that first arena."

The stench of blood and the overpowering scent of roses accosted Peeta's senses, turning his stomach, reminding him of Snow's visit to District Twelve...his home. The home he and Katniss shared.

"Aaaaargh!" He screamed, tried to loosen the binds that kept him secured in place. "Stop this! You don't have to do this! I told you...I'll disappear. I'll take Katniss and we'll both disappear. You'll never have to see us again. No one will!"

"And your child? Will I see your child? In the arena perhaps?"

'His child,' it was the first time Snow didn't question the parentage.

"No," Peeta whispered harshly. "I won't trade my child for anyone's life."

"What if I told you, your child would never have to face the arena? All you'd have to do was allow it to be raised in the Capitol. I would take excellent care of your offspring."

"NOOOOOOOO!" Peeta screamed in Snow's face. "DO WHAT YOU WANT! KILL WHO YOU WANT! I DON'T CARE!" He had been questioning whether or not the baby was his, but he never questioned

his love for the child. For some reason he felt a bond with it, and he didn't even know if it was his. Peeta knew with everything that he was, he loved that baby, and would die for it. "You'll never..." Peeta growled out, "...never get your hands on any of my children."

"Then we shall start," there was a hint of excitement in Snow's voice. "Perhaps you're unable to tell from your position on the exam table that this particular prisoner has been turned into an Avox, so you may have a hard time understanding her cries. If you'll excuse me," Snow walked through the door and entered the room leaving Peeta to watch as the torture began. Yes or no questions were asked in regards to the rebellion, all of which the Avox shook her head, no, but Snow wasn't satisfied. A knife, not just any knife, but the one Peeta had used to slit the throat of the Peacekeeper, dried blood still on the blade, was slashed across the woman's arm. Snow's demonic chuckle filtered into the room via the speakers, along with grunts from the Avox, causing Peeta's stomach to churn. He closed his eyes, trying his best to block out the image in front of him, and heard Snow's voice, "I wouldn't recommend that Peeta. If you don't watch this prisoner's death, then I'll have to make you watch another." A whip was taken to naked flesh, skin was torn apart, and the blood of a woman that had done nothing but help Peeta during the Games, sprayed onto the window with each lash of the whip.

"Stop it! Stop!" Peeta screamed, tried his best to move from his confines, but they were too tight. He watched the slow and painful death take place before his eyes. A new nightmare to add to his collection of already gruesome dreams.

President Snow walked out of the torture chamber wiping his hands on a towel. "That was a bit messier than I prefer."

"You're sick," Peeta's voice was low and damning. "I swear, the moment I'm free from here, I'll rip your throat out with my bare hands."

"Yes, I'm sure you'd like to." Snow eased his way closer to Peeta. "But you won't remember that threat, Peeta. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be offering to protect me from those rebels you love so much." He turned to look through the window. "As an artist, you must appreciate the color palate I've provided for you."

Peeta closed his eyes, but that didn't erase the image of the bright red blood mixed with the color of Camellia's orange skin. He pictured the member of his prep team the first day he had met her.

Peeta's eyes just kept following the orange girl until he finally asked her, "What's your name?"

"Excuse me?" She said.

"Your name? What is it?" He wasn't sure if he should ask, but he was curious.

"I'm Camellia and this is Horton and that's Apria." She introduced the remaining members of his prep team to Peeta.

"Camellia," Peeta said to himself. He looked at her once again and said, "You look like a sunset." The trio stopped what they were doing and Peeta wasn't sure if he should've said anything. He decided to explain himself. "That's my favorite color." When Camellia blushed he said, "Now you look like a sunrise. My second favorite color."

"I'll never forget what you've done here...what you're doing to me...to all of us," Peeta warned Snow. "If I were you, I'd kill me while you still can."

"There's no need." Snow leaned close to Peeta's ear and spoke in a disturbing voice, "The rebels will do that for me once you kill their precious Mockingjay."

Peeta noticed Camellia's body being dragged out of the room and another person being brought in. "Who is that?" Panic filled his eyes when the hood was removed to show the new prisoner. "No! NO! You said you were taking one life!"

"I said one *important* life." Snow watched the look on Peeta's face as he began to squirm. "I'm sure I'll find someone of importance to you eventually."

"Why are you doing this?" Peeta tried his best to reason with Snow. "These people never did a thing to you. They never hurt you. If you want to punish someone, punish me. I was the one that told Katniss to hold up the berries. I was the one that broke the rules the Gamemakers set in the arena."

"And you shall pay for all of that and then some." Snow pressed a button on a remote control. "Prepare him for questioning."

"Questioning? You mean torture, don't you?!" Peeta swallowed the bile that began to rise in his throat. "What do you want? Tell me and I'll do it."

The sneer on Snow's face told Peeta all he needed to know. There was nothing he could do. He had already done too much. "Relax and enjoy the show. It's a shame Katniss isn't here to see this. I'm sure she'd appreciate my logic. She understands the concept of paying a debt." Snow pointed to the window that showed Darius on the other side of it. "That is your payment, Peeta. Everything that will be brought onto that young man is because of your debt to me." As Snow headed back into the room he turned to Peeta and said, "Don't forget to watch

closely, or the next person I bring in here will be one of those girls you're so fond of in the prison cell next to yours."

"Johanna...Annie," Peeta whispered to himself. He barely blinked as two of Darius' toes were sliced off, hanging by a thread of skin. Shreds of mutilated tongue wagged as grunting sounds echoed through the room with each slash of the leather whip. As much as it hurt Peeta to watch the torment Darius was going through, he knew it was necessary to keep Johanna and Annie from going through the same.

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The dark room Haymitch slept in seemed hollow, and empty. Thoughts of the rebel's meeting to rescue the prisoners kept running through his mind. 'We're coming, Trinkie. We're filming Peeta's propos and then we're coming.' The group had decided to get the propaganda spot filmed immediately, and put on the air so they could use it as a distraction while entering the Capitol. Even though the rescue plan was in place, Haymitch's heart was still heavy, weighed down with worry for the woman he never expected to have feelings for. When he thought of Effie he didn't see her all dolled up in Capitol attire, but clean and simple. The way she looked before she went to bed at night or first thing in the morning. Over the years he had seen every side of Effie Trinket, but he never thought in a million years she would get him to feel again.

The tributes from District Three and Johanna Mason had just joined Katniss and Peeta in the arena. Now that all of the rebels were together it was time to get the escape plan underway. Haymitch and Effie were about to go to the party when a group of Peacekeepers showed up in the District Twelve suite.

"All right, I'm ready to go." Effie stopped short at the sight of the Peacekeepers standing next to Haymitch. "Do we require escorts this year?"

"No," Haymitch started. "They..."

"Miss. Trinket, your attendance is required by an official," a tall, muscular Peacekeeper said in a commanding voice.

"Haymitch, I'm afraid you'll have to work the sponsors on your own." Effie walked towards the Peacekeeper. "Don't forget your little computer and please try not to get too inebriated while I am gone." She faced the Peacekeeper that addressed her. "Shall we?"

"This way, ma'am," the Peacekeeper motioned for the roof. "We have a hovercraft waiting for you."

The second she left the room Haymitch's need for a drink was almost blinding. He gave himself a few seconds before deciding on whether or not he should go to the party without her.

"Haymitch," Portia interrupted his thoughts. "Why don't we all go to the party together?"

"Yeah...yeah...sure," he tried not to show his concern at Effie being summoned away. 'It's got to be that ass, Bettes,' Haymitch thought to himself. 'I really hate that guy.' He followed his group to where the nonstop festivities were underway and sat at the table reserved for his

team. "Whiskey," he ordered from the closest servant. 'Quit thinking about her,' he tried to get his head on straight, but it was impossible. 'Effie is a grown woman. She knew what she was getting into, but...damn it, why'd she have to go and start dating some Capitol official? Doesn't she know... Know what, Haymitch?' He silently asked himself. 'Nothing.' He ordered another drink before he took a sip from his first drink, and his mind went right back to Effie. 'You just couldn't stay out of my hair, could you? Son of a bitch. You're probably cuddled up with that blowhard right now while I'm sitting here...shit! I'm sitting here like an idiot, pining away for a woman that I'm supposed to hate.' Haymitch felt a rush of relief as the alcohol slipped down his throat. With each sip he could feel Effie's presence moving further and further away. 'You don't drink to stop thinking about some stuck up Capitol broad,' Haymitch berated himself. 'You drink to get rid of the memories of the Games. The things you did. The girl you love...Effie. Don't you mean Maysilee?' "WHISKEY!" He yelled out as he slammed the empty glass down on the table startling the rest of his team. 'You do not love Effie Trinket,' his head was practically screaming. He began listing off all of her annoying traits one by one, 'She's a nag. Yeah, but she only nags at you so you'll stop killing yourself. She can't mind her own business. She's in your business because she worries about you. Well, I didn't ask her to worry about me! And she's not that good looking!' He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and thought, 'Who the hell are you kidding? The woman's got a hell of a body and when she's not wearing all that shit on her face, she's...son of a bitch! Okay! All right! She's gorgeous!' "Get me another will ya sweetheart?" Haymitch asked the attendant that dropped off his drink. He gave Annie a wink and said, "I'm just having a couple of shots to calm the nerves." He tried to watch the Games, but he couldn't focus on them. He couldn't focus on anything but Effie's absence. 'Where are ya, Trinkie? It's been almost two hours and you're still not back. Christ, what if they're hurting you? Christ! What do you care, Haymitch!?' The

woman's been a pest in your life for over a decade, and you're sitting here worrying about her!' His head was getting that nice, fuzzy feeling. "Maybe one more," he held the glass up to the attendant and gave Portia a sloppy grin. 'She's not here to stop you, so drink away.' Effie was always trying to control his drinking, and Haymitch didn't appreciate it. 'I can stop whenever I want to. I just don't want to,' he laughed a little to himself and ignored the strange looks he was getting from the people sitting next to him. 'Get the hell out of my head, Effie. I don't want you here. Never asked you to pester me about my drinking all these years...never wanted it! I'm glad you're with that son a bitch Bettes. He can have you! You can go straight to hell with him leading the way!' He played with the glass in his hand as his heart took over, 'Where are ya, Trinkie? Time to come back. You've been with him long enough,' he didn't realize it, but Haymitch actually let out a sigh.

"Maybe you should ease up a bit, Haymitch?" Portia asked him only to be ignored.

'What'd ya do, get a substitute nag for when you're gone?' Haymitch could feel his arms and legs getting relaxed. 'Don't like it much when you're gone Effie. Things are a lot easier when you're around. Not sure why, but they are.' His eyelids seemed to weigh a ton. He tried to scan the crowd looking for her thinking, 'Maybe you're here and you just don't want to be seen with a drunkard?' "One more!" He lifted his glass in the air and shook it. 'Well, too damn bad! I'm a drunk! If you're gonna love me ya gotta love all of me.' Haymitch's tired eyes opened wide as he realized, 'Wait a minute...shit...Trinkie loves me. Nah,' he blew the thought off. 'What if she does though? What if she feels the same way about you?' Haymitch gripped the edge of the table. 'What the hell?! Who said I feel that way? I didn't say...' he noticed the Careers making a plan to attack his group of rebels in the arena on one of the large television screens. "Damn it!" He slammed his hand against the table. Haymitch wasn't sure if his outburst was directed

towards the events playing out in the arena or over the scary conclusions he was reaching about Effie. He tried to concentrate on the Games but then Portia had to go and bring her up, and once again Trinkie was dominating his thoughts.

"Where is she? She's been gone for hours."

"Do I look like her babysitter?" Haymitch spat out trying not to show his jealousy over the man Effie was keeping company with. "The woman was summoned by her boyfriend... she's probably sitting in some posh private suite enjoying the Games without all of these crazed lunatics around." Haymitch waved his arms in the air gesturing towards the crowd of guests at the party.

"Maybe we should go back to the suite," Skip, the mentor from District Four, suggested. "Eat lunch there?"

"What's wrong? Ashamed to be seen with a drunk?" Haymitch sneered.

"Yes," Annie said quietly.

"Then leave," Haymitch slurred. "Better yet...I'll leave." He tried to stand again and fell face first onto the floor.

Skip raced around the table and tried to help him up, but Haymitch just slipped out of his grip and back onto the floor again. "We're going back to the suite," said Skip.

"I ain't doing shit with you," Haymitch declared. Bright yellow pointy toed shoes with six inch heels stood directly in his line of sight. Haymitch's eyes trailed slowly from the feet, up the shapely calves to a pink and yellow striped skirt before finally settling on a gold wig. As he took in each of her features a shocking realization smacked

Haymitch upside his head. He had fallen in love with a pretentious snob, the biggest nag that ever lived. "Trinkie!"

Haymitch had tried his best to forget what he went through that day. The unbelievable amount of loneliness that filled his spirit with each glass of whiskey he drank. Things were worse now that he had just about come right out and told the woman how he felt before he left the Capitol, and now she might die. "You can't die on me, Trinkie. You promised me you stay alive." He rested his arm over his eyes in an attempt to sleep, gave up, grabbed his robe and headed upstairs.

"Haymitch?" Katniss' sleepy face peeked at him through the door to her new residency. "What are you doing here?"

"Did I wake you sweetheart? Sorry 'bout that. I'll go," Haymitch didn't know what the hell he was thinking showing up on Katniss' doorstep in the middle of the night.

"No, it's okay. Come in," Katniss held the door open for him and yawned. "I just fell asleep a little while ago, so it's no big deal."

Haymitch took a seat and asked her, "I was wondering...how ya holding up? I mean...with Peeta gone..." he lifted his forlorn eyes to hers

Katniss tightened the belt on her robe and sat across from Haymitch. "Can't say that I'm doing a bang up job keeping myself together," she held out her wrist with her bracelet on it proving her point. "I walk around talking to Peeta constantly."

"Does it help?"

She nodded. "A little, but...nothing gets rid of the emptiness inside. That feeling like a part of you is missing can be overwhelming at

times, but then I talk to him, and I draw strength from memories of him...the way his hand felt in mine...the sound of his heart beating beneath my ear..."

He looked at the girl sitting across from him and wondered when she grew into a woman. "Don't know how to do this. Haven't felt this way since I was a kid." Haymitch leaned his elbows on his knees, and finally confessed out loud. "I used to be apart from her all the time, and it never bugged me like this. I feel like I'm barely hanging on."

"She's never been in this kind of danger before." Katniss spoke as if she knew who Haymitch was talking about.

"Guess I don't have to tell you it's Effie I'm thinking of, huh?" Katniss answered him with a shake of her head. "Never meant for something like this to happen between me and her."

"Kind of creeps up on you when you least expect it," Katniss tucked a leg under herself. "You don't want it...never asked for it, yet there it is."

Haymitch was grateful she didn't actually use the word love. He was having too hard a time with the whole concept. He ran his hand down his face, let out a deep breath and sat back in his chair. "This is a load of shit. That woman is the biggest pain in my ass that ever lived." He stared Katniss in the eyes. "If I had a choice, I'd forget about her...pretend she never existed."

Katniss reached over and patted his hand. "*If* you had a choice." She sat back in her chair and said, "All I can tell you is, it's not easy when you're apart."

"Geez, I know that! You think I don't know that?!" He pointed at her, "I lost Maysilee before you were even born."

Katniss continued, "The thing I've come to realize is that, losing someone to death, and not knowing whether or not they're alive...being tortured..." She sniffed out a breath. "Sometimes, death is easier to take. You know they can't be hurt anymore...that they're safe from harm. You miss them terribly, but that nagging feeling of panic isn't always lingering inside of you." She pulled her knees up to her chest and curled her bare toes over the end of the chair. "Then I think about my life without Peeta...what it would be like, and I know I'd rather suffer for an eternity if it means he wouldn't have to go through anymore pain." Her voice took on a softer tone, "I want him to come home to me so badly, but I don't want him to suffer anymore either. I've...we've both seen what Snow's capable of doing to tributes that don't play by the rules, and I'm scared, but Peeta...he's got a strength inside of him like nothing I've ever seen before. I might be tough on the outside, but he's tougher on the inside. I think about what he would want, and I know he'd withstand any amount of torture Snow had for him if it meant that we could be together again." Katniss reached out to Haymitch. "Effie's got that kind of strength, and I know she'd do anything if it meant that you could finally have a chance at happiness. That's all she ever wanted for you."

Haymitch swallowed lump after lump that had formed in his throat, gave a cautious look to Katniss and said, "When did you become the mentor?"

"When I pulled my head out of my ass and let myself be loved...loved Peeta back."

"I never said I loved the woman," Haymitch ran a hand under his nose and sniffed.

Katniss let out a little laugh. "You didn't have to." She paused before adding, "Neither did she."

They sat in silence for a few minutes then Haymitch got up and said, "As much as I've been enjoying our late night visits, I'm hoping they come to an end as soon as we get those two out of there."

"They'll come home to us soon, Haymitch." Katniss attempted to ease his worries. "They will."

As he walked back to his quarters, he hoped Katniss was right. There was no alcohol in District Thirteen to wash away the anguish that was slowly consuming him from the inside out. He had spent over two decades trying to drink Maysilee out of his system, which didn't work. Now that he was sober he realized how special she had been to him, and tried to honor her memory by thinking of the good times they shared and not pitying himself, but could he do that if he lost his Trinkie before he even had a chance to be with her? To tell her the things he probably should've said before he stepped onto that hovercraft? In a way, Haymitch was glad Thirteen's no alcohol policy was in place. Had it not been, he'd have broken his promise to Effie and gotten drunk a thousand times over by now, and it did him no good. Yes, he was lonely without her there, but adding whiskey to the mix just made it worse. No matter what Haymitch tried, he knew that nothing could fill the void Effie Trinket left inside of him.

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Choosing to save the rest of the medication to control her morning sickness for times of necessity was not sitting well with Katniss. The instant she smelled the little bit of food Bing had brought to her from the kitchen as part of her deal with Coin, she could feel the bubbling in her stomach. 'This is not something I can deal with today,' she thought to herself as she ate about a half a cup of corn mush. The next thirty minutes was spent in the bathroom letting banana nut expel the corn mush from her system and cleaning up. A half a slice of bread to ease the queasiness then Katniss was ready for breakfast. 'Here we go again,' she thought to herself as she finished up the morning's events hoping it wasn't the reprise of what she went through during the Quell before each meal. She avoided Gale at breakfast. Their confrontation with one another after the rebel's meeting left her completely distraught.

She wanted to walk up the stairs to her quarters, but Gale's teasing left her feeling cowardly. "Are you seriously telling me you're afraid of an elevator?" He lifted up her braid and started looking at her back.

"What are you doing?" Katniss smacked his hand away.

"Looking for your spine. I know you had one when you left Twelve," he chuckled to himself.

She got on the elevator to prove a point, not only to him, but to herself. She hated them, hated anything that made her feel trapped. Using one to get her prep team out of Thirteen's jail had been difficult, and each ride after got worse. This time she kept her focus. Told herself it was a stupid little box and nothing would happen, but by the time she got to her floor, she could feel her pulse racing out of control. She kept waiting for the wristband that monitored the baby's vitals to go off, and was grateful when it didn't. Katniss tried to pass the couple of minutes in the confines of the elevator by talking to Gale about Coin's speech

during Reflection. "There was no reason for her to do that. She could have easily told these people that Peeta was innocent. Instead she made him look guilty, and gave them all the impression that I was fine with that."

"Did you really expect her to bow to your every whim?" Gale asked. "The woman is running this district. How is she supposed to do that if she gives off the appearance of caving into you?"

"You mean she can't stand any dissent, even if it's fair?" It was bad enough Gale couldn't see past his hatred, now he was sticking up for Coin.

"Hey, you're the one that put her in that position. You're the one that gave her a list of demands...wanting to make sure all the prisoners got out and didn't have to face any consequences." Gale turned to face her. "We don't even know what they've been doing out there...if they've caused any damage."

Katniss' eyes flew open, "Are you telling me I should've just let her put Peeta on trial?!"

"Not Peeta..." His lingering statement made Katniss sick.

"No, of course not Peeta. He's the Jabberjay and how would that look?" Katniss crossed her hands over her chest. "You think I should've caved into her...let the rest of the tributes take their chances? No. No," Katniss realized. "You think I should have just let Effie take her chances...because she's one of them," Katniss mimicked Gale's voice. "She's from the Capitol." She stormed down the hall towards her quarters hoping to keep her large dinner down. "When it comes right down to it, Gale, we're all taking our chances with President Coin. None of us knows what we're in for."

"How can you say that?" Gale narrowed his eyes at her. "She's taken us in...done everything you asked...she hasn't done one thing to you, but helped you and the people that are important."

"Oh, yeah! She was a biiiiiig help to Peeta tonight!"

"You put her there, Katniss. You've got no one to blame for her actions but yourself."

Katniss slammed the door in Gale's face before she blurted out the truth about Coin and the order she had given. The order that Dr. Valero ignored. At this point she wasn't sure if she could trust Gale with such precious information.

Her prep team met up with her at her quarters right after breakfast to prepare her for the day's events. Making her down to beauty base zero. Looking as though she had just stepped out of bed, naturally beautiful, took a lot of work. Flavius and Octavia worked timidly on Katniss, preparing her bubble bath, setting out the items they needed to wax her, though she didn't understand why. Who was going to see her legs? Hair, makeup... Her quarters had turned into a tiny little beauty salon. As Katniss was about to remove her robe to step into the tub, she stopped. "Flavius," she said quietly, "Would you mind leaving the room please?" The thought of another man looking at her naked body bugged the hell out of her regardless of whether or not he had seen her before. She waited while Flavius left the room, and let her robe drop. The sound of Octavia's gasp, took Katniss by surprise. "Is everything okay?"

Octavia just nodded. "Stop it," Venia scolded her. "Katniss would never do anything to hurt us." Octavia nodded again.

Katniss soaked in the bubble bath and remembered Peeta drawing several of them for her. She missed those moments more than she

imagined. Venia stepped out of the bathroom for a few minutes and Octavia held up the robe, "Quick Katniss, get out of the tub before Venia gets back."

"Why?" Katniss quickly got up and put her arms in her robe. "Is everything okay?"

Octavia pulled the bottom of the robe over Katniss' stomach just as Venia came back into the room, and Katniss had no idea what was causing the woman to act so strange. 'Octavia's always been a bit strange,' she told herself as the woman handed Katniss some undergarments. "We'll wait outside while you put these on," Octavia said to her.

Venia began gathering some items together. "We'll need to give your hair a trim, and work on your nails. You really must stop biting..."

"Come on, Venia." Octavia ushered her towards the door. "Katniss is a married woman now. She doesn't want to be walking around in front of Flavius in the nude. Go ahead and put those on Katniss. We'll wait for you out here."

Sometimes Katniss had to question these people and their odd behavior. As she stepped into her underwear she looked down at the spot Octavia kept looking at, her still flat stomach and noticed the line traveling from her navel down had gotten darker. Her eyes flashed to the doorway that Octavia and Venia had just exited through, her breath caught in her throat, and her palms began to sweat. 'Octavia knows,' she realized. 'Somehow she knows. She saw the changes...something.' "No," Katniss whispered to herself, and forced the thought out of her mind. There was no way on earth the woman could take one look at her and guess. The topic never came up, and Katniss reminded herself never to strip in front of these people again. 'You have to be more careful.' With her hair and makeup done to make

her look like a flawless version of herself, it took a lot of makeup to look like you weren't wearing any, Katniss and her team were ready for lunch then the first taping of the propos.

There was no avoiding Gale during lunch, he and his family had been assigned seats next to her and her family. The smell of the food brought on the nausea, and once again Katniss had to go through her pre-meal ritual, but losing her prep team...Gale, was going to be tricky. "Excuse me," she barely made it through the doorway into the dining hall before having to turn around and make her escape.

"I'll be right back," Prim's voice was bright and right behind Katniss. "There's a bathroom around that corner," her sister stopped by the kitchen to grab a napkin from Bing then met up with Katniss. "We're going to have to make sure we get this taken care of before you come down for meals," Prim handed her sister the napkin with bits of bread in it. "Here. Are you nauseous or actually puking?"

"Just sick to my stomach, but it won't take long," Katniss was so grateful she told Prim the truth. She nibbled on the bread and asked her sister, "Prim, do all pregnant women get a dark line on their stomach?"

Prim nodded, "Mmmm hmmm. Though I don't know why."

"Can someone that's not pregnant...like if I lost the baby a few weeks ago...would I still have it?"

"Nope." She faced Katniss. "Why?"

"So if someone saw it, they might figure it out...that I'm still pregnant?" She whispered.

"If they saw a lot of naked pregnant women, I guess," Prim giggled. "I don't know many people other than the doctors that see a lot of naked women. Do you?"

"Yeah," Katniss worried. "My prep team."

"Katniss they get tributes ready for the Games, and as far as I know, you're the only tribute to enter the arena pregnant."

"They work on people year round, Prim." She gave herself fifteen minutes after eating the bread, and was thrilled when the queasiness went away and was replaced with the need for sustenance. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

As Katniss stuck her arm under the computer scanner she felt a flood of warmth when she heard, "Katniss Mellark," instead of Everdeen. She was worried when the computer read off her nutritional needs as well as her age and weight. In the span of two weeks she had gained two pounds. Not that big of a deal, unless you lived amongst a group of people that were only given enough food to keep them at their current weight.

"Prim," Katniss leaned over and whispered to her as their food was served. "Tell Regina I'll need to see her and Justus tonight. It's important."

Prim gave her a nod. "I'm due to be in the medical bay all afternoon. Maybe I can get a break and take a peek at the spot you're recording? Let you know what she says?"

"Thanks, Prim." Katniss took a seat next to Octavia quickly noticing the woman's glances towards her tray of food, and her midriff. 'This is going to be a lot harder than I expected,' she worried with each bite of food placed upon her tongue.

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"How are you fairing this evening, Miss. Trinket?" President Snow asked with an emotionless expression.

"The hot shower helped quite a bit, but I will admit, it was a trying day to say the least." Effie stood close to Steven's side. "May I offer you some tea, sir? Something stronger perhaps?"

"No. Thank you for the offer." Snow gestured towards a chair. "May I?"

"Yes. Please." Effie hoped with all her might that he didn't take notice of the tremulous tone in her voice. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit, sir?" She expected him to take her into custody immediately, not beat around the bush.

"Peeta Mellark," Snow's face turned to stone. "He is not responding the way we had hoped. The young man's memory of Katniss Everdeen is still intact."

"Is it?" Effie asked innocently. "I was led to believe he was having quite a lot of difficulty remembering her as well as feelings of resentment towards the girl."

"Yes. Yes," he waved it off. "But he should have been much further along by now. It seems that he refuses to believe the girl had anything to do with the firebombs that struck their district."

Effie's mind was screaming, 'She didn't have anything to do with them!' "And this poses a problem."

"Miss. Trinket..." Snow was interrupted by the entrance of an elite member of his security staff. "Pardon me," he waved the man over. "What did you find out?"

"Sir, sources in broadcast defense believe that the rebels have found a way to disrupt the surveillance system again," The guard stared straight ahead and spoke in a clear, concise voice.

Snow pinched the bridge of his nose. "Can someone please explain to me how they are continually attacking our broadcast system when the rebels are spread across the country?"

"The system runs through the entire nation, sir. They appear to be tapping into it through the underground networking."

"Can we stop it?" Snow asked.

"Broadcast defense is working on it, but..." The guard flashed a look at Snow, "...sir, they believe there still may be rebel forces working inside of the Capitol."

This was where the president called Effie out. She could just feel it in her bones. "Miss. Trinket, have you been able to get any names of the rebels that have infiltrated the Capitol staff?"

"No, sir. I wasn't aware there were any." And if she had, she'd never tell. This gave Effie an idea. "Would you like me to go back to the watering hole and send another message requesting local help? Perhaps my plea will reveal undercover rebel forces left behind?" There was a different reason Effie wanted out of the Capitol's grasp even if it was only temporarily. The rebel's traitor was walking around

the Capitol with information, and Effie needed to find out how much the treasonous wretch knew. If her own cover had been blown.

"I have a job for you, Miss. Trinket. One that concerns Peeta and our efforts to gain control over his actions once he's back in contact with the rebellion," Snow turned his attention back to the guard. "Tell them to keep working on the problem...find out the source of the network's interruptions, and put a stop to it." He faced Effie again. "I believe the question as to why Plutarch Heavensbee and his staff were kidnapped has now been put to rest. They are either being forced to break down our system or have been a part of it all along. Tell me Miss. Trinket, which do you believe it is?"

Effie was carefully balancing herself on a wire. One misstep and she'd either fall victim to Snow or be considered a traitor to the rebels. "Sir, I have no idea what Viggo was thinking when he took Plutarch and his staff."

"Perhaps he didn't take them after all." Snow stood up and walked towards the door. "Yes, another visit with the rebels might be in order. You shall go tonight."

"Tonight?" She hadn't yet come up with a plan on how to capture the traitor. What to do? "If you insist." It was already late, but that never stopped the Capitol crowd from their constant need to eat, drink and be merry. "I shall call upon Portia to have her prepare me for my..."

"No need. I'm sure you have the ability to dress yourself, Miss. Trinket." Snow stood at her doorway. "Enjoy your outing. It may be your last for awhile."

Effie's insides were quaking at Snow's casual threat. "Why is that, sir?"

"It crossed my mind that Peeta's emotional ties to Katniss might be more difficult to get through than expected. He isn't following my plan." Effie could see the anger fill Snow's eyes. "Why would he believe *me* when I tell him that Katniss is the reason for the firebombs? I have put him in the arena...threatened the life of his child and that...girl," he said with disgust. "If I am to get Peeta to where I want him, he'll need to be addressed by someone he finds trustworthy." There was a look of pure evil in Snow's eyes when he said, "Such as yourself. As of tomorrow you will take over the hijacking of Peeta Mellark."

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Gale couldn't stop looking at Katniss after her prep team was done with her. Between the costume and the makeup, she looked like a force to be reckoned with. "Beetee's looking forward to seeing you."

"Is he?" Katniss hadn't seen the man for quite awhile. "How's he doing?"

"Ask him yourself," Gale walked her to an elevator. "This is the only way of getting there. No stairs." If he was going to get back on her good side he'd have to start making some compromises, and the elevator was one of them that he had no problem with even if he thought she was being a bit overemotional about them.

"That's fine."

"What's your deal with the elevators?" Gale was curious.

Katniss stepped into the close quarters, wishing the walls were glass so she could see through. "I don't like them," it was useless trying to explain to someone that had never been on the platforms that led up to the arena. "Where are we going?"

"Special Defense," Gale answered, noticing how stiff her back had become. "You're still angry with me."

"And you're still not sorry." Katniss countered.

He just didn't get where she was coming from lately. "No, I'm not. I have no problems standing by what I said. I have a right to my opinion...unless you want me to lie to you."

"No. I'd rather you rethink and come up with the right opinion." Katniss was taken off guard by the sound of Gale's laughter. He actually thought she was being funny.

"Why don't you try coming up with the right opinion instead?" He teased her.

"About what? Thinking it's okay to put everyone from the Capitol in one general column under Snow because they were born there or maybe I should change my opinion on the woman that's threatening the life of my husband? Yeah," Katniss glared at him. "That's the one I'll change...I'll go ahead and agree with Coin's thinking the worst of Peeta...making *all* of these people believe the worst in him, just so she can look that much better."

"That's not what she did." Gale was happy to see some type of rise out of Katniss today. She was going to need it while filming the war

propos. "If it weren't Peeta. If you took him out of the equation, you'd see where she was coming from."

"And if you took him out of the equation, you'd see where I was coming from." She stared at the doors as they opened.

"What?" Gale followed her into a computer room.

"Isn't that what this is all about? Peeta. You've been jealous of him for so long, you're letting it blind you." Katniss turned her head from side to side, wondering which way to go.

"This has nothing to do with jealousy." Gale knew that for sure. He wasn't jealous of Peeta. He liked the guy...thought he did a lot for the people of Twelve, but he did say some things on television that could hurt the rebellion's efforts regardless of his own message sent to Katniss. "This has to do with the war we're currently fighting. Peeta could've hurt us, Catnip. I'm not saying I blame the guy for what he said, I'd probably do the same myself if I were in his position, but that still doesn't excuse what he said out loud."

"Fine. This has nothing to do with jealousy and everything to do with your stupidity." She stomped a foot down. "Which way are we supposed to go?" There were rooms everywhere. "Where is Beetee?" Katniss asked the girl walking towards them.

"Meadowlark room," she pointed out the way.

The sheer size of their surroundings put their argument on the back burner for awhile. "Look at this stuff," Gale said as he walked. "I mean...I've been here a few times with Beetee, but he never showed me all of this."

"You've been working with Beetee?" Katniss questioned him. "Gale, how much have you been keeping from me?"

He let out a huff of air and said, "Didn't realize I needed to give you a detailed schedule of my day. Should I get a copy of it tattooed on your arm for you?" He faced her head on. "How much have *you* been keeping from *me*?"

Katniss turned her head, avoiding his stare...his question entirely. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" He leaned down. "I've seen your nutritional needs...listened to them being read out each day in the dining hall. You looked like you were going to get sick before that meeting yesterday and then the doctor comes in with that tray of food? There's something going on with you, Catnip." He had been worried about her health and needed to find out if everything was okay. "Are you still..." Katniss' eyes flashed to his in a panic. "Are you still having medical problems from everything you've gone through?"

She gave her head a little shake. "It's not really a problem. I'll be fine."

"I knew there was something wrong with you," Gale's brow furrowed. "Do they know what it is?"

"Gale...I..." What was she going to tell him? She looked into the eyes that had been there for her since she was a child and thought of the life she needed to protect growing inside of her. Nothing mattered more than that. "I have anemia." Katniss gave him a brief description of the disease she had never heard of until Prim told her about it. "So you can see why I'm trying to keep this under wraps."

"Is there any...cure?"

"The doctor is working on it, but I'm fine. Really." She tried to convince him...herself of that. "I do get pretty tired though." This was not a lie. She was completely worn out. "Then again, the nightmares don't help, but..."

Gale felt horrible for her. No wonder she wasn't fighting back as much. This blood disease left her feeling lifeless at times. "If there's anything I can do, just ask."

"There is something," Katniss gave him a grin. "Quit being such an ass. Start agreeing with me, so I won't get mad at you." This time she was the one that chuckled.

"Yeah, that'll work for us." Gale laughed with her. "What do you say we find Beetee?"

The smell of flowers hung in the air, "Mmmm...do you smell that?" Katniss felt herself being transported back in time to the meadow by her house in the Seam. "It smells like home."

Gale couldn't smell a thing. "Smells sterile. This whole place smells that way."

"No," Katniss followed the scent down a corridor and saw Beetee sitting in a glass room. "Oh, wow."

"You can smell that?" Gale saw the area Beetee was sitting in, a replication of a meadow with real trees, flowers, plants and hummingbirds zipping through the air.

"Can't you?" Katniss tapped on the glass and saw Beetee's face light up with a smile as he waved them in. She could see how sickly he still looked, sitting in a chair with wheels on it so he could get around.

"Katniss," Beetee gave her a small smile then went back to his view of the birds. "Aren't they magnificent? Thirteen has been studying their aerodynamics for years. They're amazing creatures, these hummingbirds. Moving forward...backward in flight, and speeds up to sixty miles an hour. Imagine if I could build you wings like theirs, Katniss."

"Doubt I'd be able to manage them, Beetee." Katniss laughed at the man's excitement over the birds.

"Here one second and gone the next." Beetee turned to face Katniss with a serious look on his face. "Can you bring one down with an arrow?"

"Never tried. Not much meat on a hummingbird."

"And you don't shoot for sport," there was a look of disappointment on Beetee's face when he said that. "I bet they'd be hard to shoot though."

"You could probably snare them," Gale watched the birds closely. "Make a net out of fine mesh...enclose an area, but leave a mouth of a couple square feet. Bait the inside with nectar flowers." He stepped closer to the birds and began imagining it in his head. Seeing the tiny birds feed and then... "Snap the mouth close and trap them inside. They'd fly away from the noise, but only encounter the far side of the net." He began to build the complicated snare in his mind.

Beetee got a distant look in his eyes, much like Gale's and Katniss stepped back. "Do you think that would work?" Beetee asked.

Gale shrugged his shoulder. "They might outsmart it."

There was a look Katniss could only describe as creepy that flashed across Beetee's face. "You'd be playing on their natural instincts to flee danger. Thinking like your prey...that's where you find their vulnerabilities." In that second of time Katniss saw the same expression Beetee had on his face when he was a boy. When he was playing his own Games. She had watched them with Peeta.

"We don't have to do this," Peeta knelt over a box of recordings that Effie had sent to him of all the living victors so they could prepare for the Games.

Katniss wasn't too thrilled with the idea of watching old recordings, in fact, she hated it. Those were one of the main reasons Peeta had been sleeping on the couch during their training for the Games. "You promised me you wouldn't ignore me anymore for these things."

"And I meant that, Katniss." He held her gaze from across the room. "We've been getting along so well this past couple of weeks. Do you really want to tempt that by watching old Games?"

"No," she shook her head. "I want to crawl into bed next to you, and sleep peacefully, but that's not going to happen."

"We can do something else." Peeta placed a recording on the fireplace mantel, knelt in front of Katniss and held her hands in his. "Play chess...I'll read to you if you want or we could..."

"We can get ready for the Games. Now that we're going into the arena, we need to be ready." She rested her forehead against his. "Just promise me that we can shut them off if I ask."

"Don't even have to turn them on, Katniss." Peeta's hand caressed the side of her face. "You're cold." He stripped off his blue sweatshirt leaving him in a white t-shirt, and pulled it over her head. "Here. Wear

*this." He cuffed the sleeves until the tips of her fingers stuck out.
"Better?"*

"Better." She looked down at her bare legs. "Don't suppose you want to donate your pants too?"

Peeta chuckled and said, "You wait right there. I'll be back."

Katniss sat up straight on the sofa. "Where are you going?"

"Just because we're watching the Games, doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other's company. I'm going to make us some of that mint tea you like," he ducked into a closet, came out with a blanket and covered her legs. "You're going to relax right there and after the tea is made, we'll lay down together, watch the Games and maybe you'll doze off. If you do, I promise I'll shut the television off and go up to bed with you."

He always knew what to do to make things a little more bearable. "I love you, Peeta."

He knelt in front of her and placed a soft kiss against her lips. "Will you love me more if I bring you a cheese danish?"

"I'll love you more if you brought me that and some of those lemon bars." She had been so hungry lately.

*"Lemon bars and a cheese danish," Peeta kissed her forehead.
"Anything else?"*

She gave it a second and said, "Yeah, I want a sandwich."

"One sandwich, lemon bars and a cheese danish. Something salty too?" Peeta asked in a joking manner.

"Oooh, yeah. Good idea. Can we make popcorn? Or...do we have any of those nuts you used the other day? You know the ones in that bread." She had eaten dinner only a couple of hours earlier, yet she was famished. "Or maybe..."

"Katniss," Peeta lifted a hand up to her. "Why don't I make you a tray and you can pick and choose what you want? Sound good?"

She nodded. "Sounds great. I'll get the recording ready."

"That's okay," Peeta called to her from the kitchen. "You stay put. Let me take care of you for a little while."

Being lazy wasn't something she enjoyed unless Peeta was involved. For some reason he loved doing little things for her, and she actually liked letting him pamper her. "If you insist," she said, not knowing if he heard her.

He returned within ten minutes carrying a tray loaded with various items. A sandwich, lemon bars, two cheese danishes, cheese, crackers, fruit, nuts and some of her favorite goose liver with puff pastries. "Oh, I love this stuff." She slathered an enormous amount of it onto the pastry and ate it in two bites. "Mmmm, I'm so glad you learned how to make this. It's really good."

"That's why I learned how to make it. I'm just glad you didn't eat it all earlier." Peeta grinned at her over his cup of tea. "We'll snack first, then watch. Okay?"

She demolished the tray of food within minutes. "I have no idea why I'm so hungry lately, but I can't seem to get enough food."

"Lately? You've always been like this. It's one of the reasons I find you so alluring. You eat more than anyone I've ever known, yet you're still

the size of one of those pixies in those stories Effie sent to me. It's quite cute."

"I'm not cute," she scowled at him.

"Right now, you're absolutely adorable." Peeta placed another kiss against her lips to keep her from arguing. "Face it, you're cute." He moved the tray to the side and turned on the recording. "Tell me the second you want to me to shut it off."

"Who are we watching?" Katniss lifted the blanket for Peeta to crawl under.

"A victor from District Three."

"District Three? They don't have many victors, do they?" Katniss snuggled close to his side.

"Nope, but this kid...Beetee, he was pretty smart. Kind of intimidating the way he gets rid of the tributes." Peeta pulled her closer. "Brawn is easy to battle, but brains... This guy has them in spades. I've watched his Games already."

Katniss and Peeta watched the Games as a young boy outsmarted the group of Careers hunting him down. By the end of the Games they were lying on their sides, Peeta spooning behind her, the blanket pulled up over them. "What's he doing?" She couldn't take her eyes off of the scrawny boy watching as his competition's bodies convulsed from the electrical shock he caused them.

"He's watching them die." Peeta's arm drew her back closer to his chest. "I think he wants to make sure they don't get out of his trap."

"Shut it off." Katniss felt like the snack she had eaten was about to come up.

Peeta pushed the button on the remote control and their living room turned dark and quiet. "See what I mean about the brains thing?"

The tribute's smarts didn't bother Katniss as much as the look that crossed his face while the other tribute's bodies were writhing on the ground. "Peeta," she rolled over into his arms, "he looked like he enjoyed their deaths."

Katniss could see the look of concern on Peeta's face. "They were trying to kill him, Katniss. He was trying to survive."

She tucked her head under Peeta's chin, "Yeah...I suppose so, but..." she shivered. "That was creepy."

"We should've played chess," Peeta kissed the top of her head.

"No. I need to see these recordings too." There was something terrifying about the little boy from District Three. "The thought of children dying is bad enough, but seeing another child entranced by the kids he murdered is pretty disturbing."

"He's older now," Peeta kept brushing his lips against her head. "I'm sure he feels like the rest of us do about the kids he had to kill in order to survive the arena."

"I hope so." She wrapped her arms around Peeta's torso and tucked her legs between his. "The last thing we need is some crazed victor that likes to kill people as competition."

It was a thought Katniss had put out of her head once meeting Beetee and Wiress. The man seemed to be harmless as well as kind, but the

look in Beetee's eyes...the one he had during the deaths of the Careers was back and aimed at the innocent birds flitting about the man made meadow in District Thirteen. "Beetee, Plutarch said you had something for me." The desire to leave the area designated as Meadowlark was overwhelming.

"Yes, I do. Your bow," the disturbing look was replaced with one of anticipation. As Beetee led them through the corridors with the aid of his chair he explained how he was able to walk, but used the chair to keep his strength up. "I tire so quickly. How is Finnick doing, Katniss?"

"He's...uh..." She didn't want to let onto what Finnick was going through. "He's having some concentration problems."

"If you knew what Finnick has been through in the past few years, you'd know how remarkable it is that he's with us at all." Beetee took them down a hallway towards a barrage of security. "Tell him I'm working on a new trident for him. Maybe it will distract him from his current state?"

"Yeah. Sure," There was nothing Beetee could design that would distract Finnick with the exception of a time machine that would save Annie from being trapped in the Capitol.

"We'll have to go through a few precautions before entering Special Weaponry." Beetee lifted a hand towards the metal detectors. "Once through we'll need to go through finger, retinal and DNA scans. Gale, you've been here before, I'm sure you remember."

"Yeah," Gale sounded almost cowardly to Katniss, and again she wondered how much her friend was keeping from her. He hoped she didn't continue to question why he was working with Beetee.

"Did you say, DNA scan?" Katniss worried for a moment. Would they find out about the baby? "What does that entail?"

"Nothing much." Beetee stood from his chair and walked through the metal detector. "Simply walk through the archway and it will make sure you are who you say you are."

But would it? Katniss held her breath as she stepped through the archway and heard the computer start speaking in its generated voice. "Katniss Mellark." She breathed a sigh of relief until a red light began to flash and an alarm went off. "Unknown DNA detected."

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Haymitch paced around the outskirts of the building that housed the residents of District Thirteen waiting for Katniss to show up. "Where the hell is she?"

"She should be here any minute." Fulvia handed Plutarch a computerized clipboard. "Here's the script. I'm concerned about a few lines..." Plutarch and his assistant began talking quietly amongst themselves while Haymitch's patience was tested.

"She's got five minutes then we're sending out a search team. We've got a lot to do." The sooner Katniss got her portion of the propos recorded, the sooner they could put together the package with Peeta's interview and get their rescue plan in action. The sight of her walking

towards the group with Gale by her side, did nothing but agitate him even more. 'Geez,' he shook his head when he saw all the goop on her face. 'What the hell did they do to you sweetheart?' He hated the look they gave her. It did nothing but made her appear to be a Capitol version of what they thought a rebel would look like.

"Katniss," Plutarch rushed to her side. "We'd like to get you in a natural setting." He guided her to the edge of the woods and showed her the script they had written out for her.

Haymitch sat back in one of the folding chairs that were brought out for the crew and listened to Katniss' attempts at sounding forlorn...worried...angry... "This isn't working," he said to himself, as he ran a hand down his face. "Plutarch, the girl isn't getting it done."

"She's had a rough afternoon," Gale stood behind Haymitch's chair. "Apparently this anemia thing has caused more medical problems than she realized."

"What anemia thing?" This was news to Haymitch. "What the hell is anemia?"

Gale shrugged his shoulder, "Some type of blood disease that hasn't been around for ages. Doctor is working on it, but they think it might be screwing with her DNA."

"Is it fatal?" The thought of her dying from some strange sickness, after all she had been through to save her life, caused a surge of panic to rush through Haymitch.

"No." Gale moved closer to Haymitch. "I'm not sure she wants people to know about it, but after the scene in Special Weaponry earlier, wouldn't surprise me if it became the talk of the district."

"What the hell happened?" Haymitch pulled the earpiece out of his ear so he could concentrate on Gale.

"We went through the DNA scanners and the alarm went off. Apparently it didn't recognize all of Katniss' DNA. That doctor came down from the medical bay and told Beetee it's because she had to get so many different blood transfusions, guess the supply they have here isn't as close to the real thing as they thought when they created it in their labs. Now the doctor's got to put her through some tests. Make sure it's temporary."

"But she's all right?"

The sound of Katniss' having a fit and kicking at the ground turned both Gale and Haymitch's head. "Seems to be," Gale smiled. "Looks pretty normal to me."

"Hi," Prim spoke from behind them. "How's it going?"

"Prim? What are you doing here?" Gale looked around and saw a guard at her side. "You should be inside."

"I'm here for Katniss. Doctor Valero sent me to do a scan of her vitals since she's not wearing that bracelet anymore." Prim looked at Katniss who was having a tantrum. "I'm guessing this isn't the best time."

"No, go ahead sweetheart." Haymitch told her. "Girl could probably use a little break."

"I can't stand this crap. These eyelashes keep sticking together!" Katniss ripped them off of her eyes and threw them to the ground. "Does somebody have a tissue?! I need to get this crap off of my face," she grumbled.

Haymitch shook his head trying to hide his smile, "Plutarch, call a ten minute break." He sat back on the chair as the crew gathered together in small talk, and listened to Katniss and Prim's conversation through his earpiece.

"You okay?" Prim sat on a rock and patted the spot next to her.

"Fine!" Katniss sat down in a huff. "No," her demeanor quickly changed to one of concern. "I can't do this...be this...*thing* they want me to be."

"You mean the Mockingjay?"

"No. I mean this made up piece of work." Katniss gestured to her hair and makeup. "This isn't me."

"No. It's not." Prim began to walk around her with a device in her hand and scanned Katniss' body. "It is your job though."

"My job is supposed to be questioning Snow's reasoning for Peeta's interview with Caesar, but these questions they wrote are..." Katniss let out a burst of air. "Why do these people think they know what I would say? They have no clue who I am...who Peeta is."

"Plutarch," Haymitch called the man over. "Is that camera running?"

"Yes," he checked it. "It's still recording."

"Good." Haymitch continued to watch Katniss and Prim.

"So tell them, Katniss." Prim looked over the device in her hand and pushed some buttons. "If you want to get Peeta back, you're going to have to let them know who you are." Prim sat next to her sister.

Katniss' voice got quiet. "It wouldn't matter anyway. They just don't see it. Any of it."

"Like what?"

"Like..." Katniss held her arm out, pulled off a black band and showed Prim what it had been covering, "...this scar. When they look at it all they see is a disgusting mark, but it's more than that. Each scar on my body has a...story behind it, but they don't really make a difference because Peeta's not here for me to talk to...to," She sighed, "to share them with." Katniss looked into the woods. "President Snow wiped all of those away from Peeta when they captured him from the arena. Gave him a body polish, as if buffing away the scars on the outside would hide the fact that we went through hell together. Like it could just wipe away all the hurt on the inside. He doesn't know, or maybe he does know, and chooses to ignore it, but going through the Games...killing all of those kids just so you can live... Peeta was right when he said it costs you everything you are. Doing that sort of thing...it makes a mark you can't erase...you can't put makeup on it and shine it up. It's still there, and it hurts. Now Peeta's in Snow's hands and..." Katniss faced Prim. "Does he think I'm an idiot? Is Snow under the impression that showing me a prerecorded interview of Peeta all dressed up, means I'm going to believe he's fine? That the people of this country are going to fall for his smoke and mirrors? We're smarter than he gives us credit for. The people of the districts...they'll see through the words Peeta said. They'll look past the body polish...the makeup and they'll see the man that would do or say anything to save my life."

"Like when he joined the Careers," Prim patted Katniss' hand.

"Everyone thought the worst of him when he first joined up with them, but it didn't take long for Peeta's real motives to show. He was willing

to die...be tortured by Careers so I could live, and he's doing it again. Doing what he has to...saying what he has to, so Snow won't kill me." Katniss wiped the lipstick she was wearing off on the hem of her mockingjay uniform. "We can't hide who we really are no matter how much crap they put on us. Snow can try and make me...all of us believe that Peeta's some traitor, but we know better."

"Yes," Prim took her sister's hand. "We do."

Katniss sniffed and said, "I keep thinking...if Snow were as brave and powerful as he wanted us all to believe, he'd quit hiding Peeta. Instead of putting an interview on from weeks ago, he'd do a live one so I could see what my husband really looks like, only he won't because it will show the people of this nation exactly the kind of man he is. He's a coward. Afraid of two kids that did nothing but fall in love and challenged the Capitol for their right to live."

Haymitch could feel the eyes of the people around him, turned and saw them glued to Katniss' every word. "And that, my friends, is how you win a war."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 7: The Mystery of Thirteen, a

hunger games fanfic |

FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Six: The Mystery of Thirteen

Hello one and all! Welcome back. So far we've got Peeta who is having troubles with his memory, but Effie has switched out the tracker jacker venom for a weaker "social drug" called jacker juice. Will it help or hurt Peeta's memories? Katniss let her true feelings out about Snow and what she thought about his recording of Peeta while talking to Prim. She's also having a very difficult time hiding this pregnancy. Gale has been trying his best to get over Katniss, and now it's time for a new outlet.

A little note to all the Gale fans out there. I have said this on my tumblr page and I will say it again here. I'm glad you're a fan of Gale's. He's an interesting character, but I did not create his anger or hatred. That was Suzanne Collins. If you want to hate the fact that I'm delving into his fiery side, go ahead, but do not send me hate mail or post reviews that are hateful over a character I didn't create. Gale is who he is, and I have given him a lot more compassion than I ever expected to. I don't despise him or anything, I'm just not writing a Gale fic. This is a *Katniss and Peeta* fic and as I said on tumblr, they are the hero and heroine of my story. If you have a question as to why I wrote a particular

thing ask me on my tumblr page or PM, and I will try to answer you to the best of my ability. jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com. If you just want to be hateful, send some mail to Suzanne Collins and ask her why Gale hated the Capitol and created the bomb that killed Prim.

I write these stories out of my love and respect for the characters that Suzanne Collins has created. I do not do this for money. It is not my line of work. I do it for the sheer enjoyment it brings to me. Thank you for the feedback, the reviews and most of all for reading. I appreciate it. S and A, thank you for all you have done and all you continue to do. You are the best.

Let's not linger here anymore. Let's go to...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Gale walked a step behind Katniss towards her quarters wondering what he was going to do. Listening to her talk that afternoon about President Snow's cowardice had churned feelings inside of him he had been trying to bury. Being in love with someone else's wife was not something he took pride in, and he was sure he was on his way back to friendship with Katniss, then she went and showed that side of her...that combination of bravery and vulnerability that captured everyone's hearts. "You want to hunt this afternoon with our new bows?" His was a real work of art he got while in the weapons department. It wasn't anything like Katniss' that came to life when she spoke, but still, it was the most beautifully crafted bow he had ever touched. "Might make you feel better."

"I'm fine," Katniss smiled up at him and Gale had to remind himself he couldn't let her do this to him. He couldn't open up his heart to her again, but she looked so... Gale made a little grunting noise. "You okay?" Katniss asked him.

"Yeah." 'Hell no,' he thought to himself. 'Those Capitol people turned you into something I've never seen before.' Catnip actually looked sexy as sin wearing all that dark eye makeup, her lips stained from the lipstick they had applied, and she wiped off. "So...um...did you want to...go hunt?"

"Not really." She stood outside of her quarters with her hand on the door. "I'm just going to get this stuff off and write some stuff down."

"Write some stuff down? Got another list of demands?" Gale leaned against the wall hoping she'd invite him in, telling himself he should really leave, 'Get the hell out of here. She belongs to Peeta.'

"Guess you could say it's therapy so I'll stop talking to Peeta." She grinned. "Doctor thinks it might be good if I wrote to him every now and then instead."

He gave her a slow nod, but didn't hear a word she said. 'You really have no idea what you're doing to me, do you Catnip?' He tried not to think about her in that way, but he couldn't help it. She looked so gorgeous all dressed up. "You should stay that way. I like the way that stuff makes your eyes look."

Katniss twisted her face, "Thought you hated what my prep team did to me?"

"I hated *why* they did it to you, not the end result." He gave her a crooked smile. "There's nothing wrong with looking attractive every now and then, Catnip."

"Every now and then?" She let out a little laugh and gave her head a little shake. "You two are so different. You really are."

"Who?"

"You and Peeta." She twisted her doorknob. "You're standing there telling me I should stay all made up, and if he were here he'd be handing me a warm washcloth so I could get rid of it all." The smile Gale had on his face slowly disappeared. "See you later." She closed the door, and like that Gale was left alone with his thoughts.

'She's taken. He's not here.' The mental debate began in his head. 'Would you really do that to Peeta? You mean what he did to me? Take the girl I loved? Are you in love with her? If you were wouldn't you try to understand some of the points she's brought up lately?' He didn't like that way of thinking. 'Yeah...if she were right...I'd agree with her.' Gale headed for his quarters, stopping at the door's entrance when he heard the sounds of children laughing coming from behind it. He loved his brothers and sister, but he really didn't feel like being trapped behind closed doors with them at the moment. He needed a place to get his mind off of things. Off of Catnip. The woods would've been his first choice, but they were currently off limits. There was a place he could go though. Gale entered the area Beetee was holed up in and asked for him. He was led to the Special Weaponry area and saw the man sitting at a computer screen pushing buttons and talking to himself. "Hey, Beetee."

"Gale," there was a hint of surprise in his tone. "What brings you back here?"

"I was thinking of that snare to capture the hummingbirds." He took a seat next to the man. "Wondering if maybe you wanted me to work on something like that for you."

"Not for the hummingbirds, but there is something you could do that may be of help." Beetee pulled up what he was working on. "Talk of your snare gave me an idea for a weapon, though I'm not very

knowledgeable when it comes to snares, I do have experience in capturing prey."

"What type of weapon?" Gale looked over the rough schematics Beeteer was working on. "Are these live electrical wires?"

"Yes," Beeteer nodded. "I used something similar during my Games, though I never really thought about using it in a grander scale until you spoke earlier."

"Looks like a good idea, but...where are you going to get the source of electricity? It would probably work better if it didn't require any. Maybe turn it into...hmmm" Gale studied it and suggested, "What if you didn't use electricity, but explosives instead?"

"Explosives?" Beeteer began pushing at some buttons. "A bomb of sorts."

"Not of sorts." Gale was picturing his district getting firebombed and retribution that was rightly his. "A bomb. Period."

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Her red wig was in place. Red and black eyelashes were applied. Bright blue eye shadow accentuated her large eyes, bright red lips with black liner around them and pale skin. Effie Trinket was ready to enter the nightlife scene of the Capitol. Her snug fitting red and black

pantsuit wasn't something she'd normally wear, but she needed mobility tonight. Effie was going on the hunt. It was her last shot at freedom before being taken into custody, because if her plan failed, whether the traitor told Snow about her or not, chances were she would be found out. "Mr. Tanner, you can drop me off at the end of the block. I shall walk from there."

"Can't do that ma'am. Your safety comes first." He opened the car door for her.

"If that were true, then you wouldn't jeopardize my cover," She glared at him the moment he sat next to her. "I am going into an area where there are known rebels, and your..."

"Exactly why I need to stay by your side." he interrupted her.

"Do you want me to fail?" She snapped. "Do you want me to die?! Unlike you, these people will not think twice about slitting my throat!"

They argued back and forth with one another until they were only a mile away from the bar Effie had sent Haymitch a message from. "Mr. Tanner," she lowered her voice down. "I am trying to understand why you insist that your purpose is to protect me, yet you feel the need to threaten my existence by entering that place alongside of me."

He pulled over to the side of the road. "Miss. Trinket, *I'm* trying to figure out why you continually put your life in danger."

"One must really wonder why you haven't climbed up the ladder of success when you're so free with your opinions," Effie said in a huff.

"I'm the private Peacekeeper of the president's personal assistant. I'd say I'm doing well considering where I started." He reached for his

ankle and unstrapped a gun. "Do you know how to shoot one of these?"

"I shot one once." Effie stared at the weapon. Images of Viggo Bettes body crumpling in front of her, flashed before her eyes. "I am in no way a marksman."

"They aim themselves." He held the gun out to her then paused. "You're not going to kill me to get even for that whole knife thing, are you?"

Effie couldn't help the grin. "No." She snatched the gun out of his hand. "How do I use this?"

"First of all, you need to put it someplace safe...someplace it won't be seen."

"You kept yours in your boot, perhaps that would be the wisest place for me to keep it as well?" The gun felt similar to the last one she held.

"There's a laser on here that will point at your target When it's in sight all you have to do is squeeze the trigger." Steven waited until she tucked it into her boot. "Promise me you'll use it if you get into danger."

"I shall use it if I get into danger," Effie was planning on using it to keep her from danger.

"One hour Miss. Trinket. You have one hour before I head in there to find you." He pulled a band out of his pocket and strapped it around her wrist. "Tuck this under your sleeve. If you need me all you have to do is push the button on the side and call for me."

"Can everyone hear us with this?" If so, then she was caught for sure.

"No ma'am. I have it set on a private frequency. It's linked to my communication band only." He looked at his watch. "Time starts now, Miss. Trinket. Sixty minutes."

Effie gave him a curt nod and headed down the street towards Carter's bar. It was time to put an end to the traitorous pig once and for all. She entered the crowded club. Since the start of the war her fellow residents seemed to be on a partying rampage. If she thought the club was busy the first time she went there, tonight it was packed as tight as a can of sardines. She felt herself being bumped and pushed against other people, but no one paid any mind to it. They all seemed to be in their own little inebriated world. Effie scanned the crowd...the bar, but the person she needed to see was nowhere in sight. She walked to the bar, squeezed her way to the counter and waited for the woman Carter was in love with to greet her, but she wasn't there. She considered making an inquiry about her whereabouts, but she could be recognized, and that would do her no good. "What can I get ya?" A man behind the bar slapped a napkin in front of Effie.

"Whiskey neat." She wished Haymitch was there by her side. His favorite drink would have to suffice. In the corner of her eye she saw the girl she needed to speak with walking towards the backdoor, pulling a light jacket over her shoulders. Effie forgot about her drink order and forced her way through the maze of people until she stepped out into the dark alleyway behind the bar. Her head turned from one side to the other in search of Carter...his girlfriend...anyone. Effie could feel the blood pumping through her veins when she saw the flash of color hidden in the crook of the building about ten yards away. She pulled out the gun from her boot, tucked it behind her tiny purse and walked on her tiptoes. Static and crackling sounds began to filter quietly out of the archway where the person was hiding. Then the sound of a voice came through.

"Airwaves will be flooded within twenty-four hours. I repeat, airwaves will be flooded within twenty-four hours."

Effie could hear the huff of air coming from the area. She stepped to the side and saw first hand what the rebel's traitor was up to. Mentally taking notes as she listened to a device in regards to the rebel's upcoming plans. "Have you heard enough, lanthe?" Effie held the gun up to the startled woman. "Or should I call you, orange blossom?"

"Do I..." a hint of recognition flashed in the woman's eyes. "Effie Trinket. And here we thought you were on our side." Effie wasn't sure exactly which side the 'we' she referred to was.

"Set the device down at your feet," Effie could feel her insides trembling as the girl placed the portable radio onto the ground. "Kick it towards me."

"Tell me Effie, do you think you'll be able to get away with this?" The orange skinned girl's voice was too calm...too collected for Effie's taste.

"With what? Getting rid of a traitor such as yourself?" Effie glared at the woman. "Yes. I believe I will." She bent at the knees, never taking her eyes off of lanthe and picked up the device. "What is this?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you, do you?" There was humor in lanthe's eyes. "Good luck figuring it out on your own."

She moved the gun closer to lanthe, "I was able to figure out that you were the traitor. I'm sure I'll be able to handle this as well." But Effie didn't know and the machine kept spewing out information.

"...within forty-eight hours. Repeat. The packages will be picked up within forty-eight hours."

"The packages?" Effie could only assume that they referred to the prisoners. "I really must speak with them regarding a more complicated verbal code." She gestured with her chin towards the trash disposal area. "Move."

Effie pressed the barrel of the gun into lanthe's back as she walked. "How will you explain my disappearance to President Snow on the very same night that you showed up in Carter's club?"

"Simple. You were nowhere to be found. You do have a choice lanthe. Tell me what information you've passed onto the president and I can arrange for you to be held somewhere safe until the rebels come to rescue us."

"You have a choice as well, Effie. Put the gun down and I'll let you live." Effie could hear the certainty in the girl's voice, and it terrified her to the core. "Carter will find out about this, and your cover will be given up immediately. The only reason he's with you rebels is to save me," she let out a disturbing chuckle. "Idiot."

"Carter will stand by the rebels, not some conniving woman that's been fooling him for...how long has it been, lanthe?" Effie could hear the sounds of the bracelet Steven gave to her start to crackle. "Stop there," she ordered lanthe when they were close to the trash disposal system many of the bars had behind their business to quickly remove waste. Could she do this? Kill this woman in cold blood without finding out any information? And what was she supposed to do with the body? Her intentions that night had been to out her to Carter and hope he would do the right thing, then Steven gave her the gun, and now the right thing was left up to Effie. "This is your last chance," her voice was shaking. "What did you tell the president?"

"If you're wondering if he knows about you...keep wondering. As a matter of fact, you can keep wondering about everything I've told him."

The secret room you've been meeting in. Peeta's involvement with the rebellion." Ianthe glared at Effie through narrow eyes. "Your involvement with them. Do you think the man is an idiot? He didn't rise to power by being stupid."

Effie could feel herself shaking. "What have you told him?!"

"You'll never find out." The sound of people exiting the bar from the backdoor, and laughter caused Effie to look over her shoulder, but that was all it took for a trained spy to make her move.

Ianthe grabbed Effie's wrist, pushing it away and to the side so the barrel of the gun was no longer pointed at her. Effie dropped her purse, the small radio and began to struggle with the woman. She had never been in an altercation in her life, and knew she was no match for this woman. As Ianthe pushed her down to the ground, kneeed her in the stomach, and continued to try and force the gun from Effie's grasp, she thought of Peeta, and how he had killed the Peacekeepers so easily. Loose pebbles began to dig into her back, her fingers were growing numb from clamping onto the gun so tightly, and the communication band around her wrist began to vibrate causing Ianthe to loosen up her hold momentarily, but that was all Effie needed to pull the gun between their bodies and squeeze the trigger. The muffled shot caused Ianthe to moan in pain. Effie rolled the woman's body over and quickly got to her feet.

"You won't..." Ianthe began to choke. "They'll...find out...about...you." Her hands were clenched over the gunshot wound Effie had caused in her stomach.

Effie nervously looked around. The couple that had exited the bar were gone, but someone else was roaming about in the darkness. The commotion from the street full of people drinking and laughing...the sounds of the bar's thumping bass had disguised the gunshot, but

anyone would be able to see the puddle of blood currently pouring out of lanthe as well as the woman's injured body. She looked to the side and saw exactly what she needed.

"Peeta will...be tortured...to death," lanthe let out a crazed, sickly laugh. "Katnisssss..." she choked as Effie dragged her by the arms towards the trash. "That baby of...of theirs...will be...raised...by Snow...when..."

That was all Effie had to hear. "Over my dead body!" She had no clue where her strength came from, but a surge of power shot through Effie as she lifted lanthe's upper body off the ground and pushed her head into the trash disposal system. "I'll make sure to give Carter your best." She lifted lanthe's feet and pushed like her life depended on it. The raging flames of the equipment instantly shot up when it sensed a foreign object, engulfing lanthe's screaming body as Effie grabbed the gun and the rebel's radio and tucked them into her purse. "Steven...Mr. Tanner," she pushed the button on her bracelet. "Where are you?"

"Here," Effie turned around and saw her Peacekeeper standing twenty-five feet behind her. "We need to get you out of here. Someone in the club may have heard that gun."

Effie was shaking like a leaf as her guard took hold of her arm and dragged her towards the street around the back of the building. "Mr. Tanner...Steven?"

"Walk," his voice was stern. "Whatever you do, don't look back."

This caused Effie to look back over her shoulder. "Dear me," she gasped when she saw the body of Carter Darlington lying dead in a pool of his own blood with a gun in his hand. "Did you..."

"Keep walking Miss. Trinket." Steven got her to their car, pushed her into her seat and entered on his side. "You need an alibi."

"My goodness," her whole body was like ice. "What have you done?"

"I saved your life. Did you really think I was going to let you face rebels on your own?" He snapped at her, and gripped the steering wheel of the car. "You need an alibi."

"I need to clean the blood off of my hands." She looked down at the wet spot she felt on her stomach, but lanthe's blood was disguised by her black clothing.

"Take off your gloves," he ordered her and began digging through the glove compartment. "Here," he handed her some tissues and a bottle of water. "Moisten the tissues and wipe your hands clean."

"Mr. Tanner?" She had no idea what was going on in his mind. Did he know what she had done? Was he on her side? Did he think she killed a rebel or was he aware that she had just killed the Capitol's spy? "Why...why did you..." a thought came to Effie. "If you were going to be watching me, then why did you give me a gun?"

"My job is to protect you," he said through gritted teeth. "I took an oath, Miss. Trinket, and that means something to me. I pledged to dedicate my life to your safety. If that means I have to help you break out of the Capitol, then that's what I have to do."

She swallowed hard. "Break out?"

"They know," he let out a huge gust of air. "At least they would've if I hadn't shut down the surveillance to the residencies on the president's property."

"That was you?" Was this man a rebel dressed as a Peacekeeper?
"Why would you do that?"

He whipped his head in her direction. "How many times do I have to tell you? I swore to protect you!"

"You mean...you're willing to break the law in order to...keep your word?" Effie couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Would you rather I be like all the rest of the Peacekeepers they swear in and switch my allegiance at the drop of a hat?" He smacked his hand against the steering wheel again. "Give me the gun." Effie faltered. "If I wanted you dead, I'd have let that man find you in the alley. Now, give me the gun." he held his hand out to her.

Effie didn't know if she should or shouldn't give up the only weapon in her possession until he reached for her purse. "Wait." She didn't want him to see the radio. "I'll get it for you."

"Miss. Trinket," his face was stern but almost friendly. "Please don't shoot me. Right now I'm the only thing keeping you alive." She placed the gun in the palm of his hand just as a group of Peacekeepers rounded the corner. "We're going back to the bar."

"No, I can't..."

"You can." Steven started the car. "I'm going to drive you to the door, you're going to...did anyone recognize you in there tonight?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Good. You're going to be recognized now." Steven pulled the car to a stop just at the door's entrance. "Walk up to one of the attendants at the entrance. Ask them if there's a charge to enter the club or if you're

able to simply walk in." He looked her over to make sure there were no visible signs of blood. "From the looks of all the Peacekeepers coming this way, they're not going to let anyone in. I'll get out of the vehicle and try to get information from one of them...let them know I just brought you here."

"In other words, our alibi is that we were still traveling here?"

"That's it."

"Mr. Tanner, you're quite smart for a Peacekeeper." She gave herself the once over in the mirror. "What if they let me in?"

"They won't, and when they tell you that you can't enter, act like...like it's a..." He struggled to find the words.

"Act like a snob," Effie found them for him.

"Yes." He looked through the rear view window. "Go on, Miss. Trinket. I'll get you out of here in a few minutes." Steven Tanner wasn't lying. The second Effie approached the doorway Peacekeepers stopped her from entering the building. Steven hopped out of the vehicle and began conversing with a fellow guard then led her back to their waiting vehicle. "That went well." He started driving them back to Effie's quarters. "Now all of them know you didn't arrive until after the murders."

"Murders?" Effie said quietly.

"They've already discovered the woman's body. The stench of burning flesh is quite distinctive."

"Yes...well..."

"Tell you what Miss. Trinket. I'll keep your secret about that woman, if you keep mine about that man." He gave her a quick glance. "Deal?"

"Deal," she said. Her voice full of question, and shame. "I...I had no choice Mr. Tanner. I had to..." Effie clamped her lips together and focused out the window.

"I'm aware. She would've blown your cover."

Effie whipped her head around to face him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're a spy Miss. Trinket. A rebel spy." He pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car. "You're lucky I found out when I did. Now the trick is to get you out of the Capitol."

This could have been a trick on the president's part, so Effie didn't admit to a thing. "If it hadn't been such a difficult night, I'd take offense at your statement."

Steven let out a laugh. "If I hadn't sworn an oath to protect you, I'd have killed you the moment I found that computer of yours." Effie's hand flew to her corset. "You're going to need a new hiding place for that thing. Chances are you'll start getting searched before entering a room with that tribute from Twelve."

"His name is Peeta." It was all over now. Effie had been discovered. "Will they be waiting for me when I return?"

"No ma'am. Not unless that woman you killed told them who you were, and like I said, I fudged with the security surveillance earlier so no one saw you when you left your bedroom earlier."

"What?" Effie's hand flew to her mouth. "Mr. Tanner. How do you know about that?"

"Why do you think I left you alone with one of the worst Peacekeepers in the Capitol? Why I told you about the underground railroad to begin with? I figured you'd need to take a look around after I showed you a way out." Steven started the car. "Surveillance is down in your room for the night, so if you have any more questions you can ask me there, but I wouldn't suggest it. Snow's good for putting in portable devices. And no more taking off, Miss. Trinket. I can't protect you if I don't know where you are."

"Yes. All right," she agreed. After a moment she turned to face him and asked in utter disbelief, "Who *are* you?"

"Tanner. Steven Tanner. Son of Alexandria and Horatio Tanner, Peacekeeper from District Two, sworn to protect Effie Trinket's life no matter what the cost." He stole a peek at her. "Even if she's a rebel and I'm not."

"Then you'll have your work cut out for you in a few hours," Effie sat back in her seat. "The president expects me to try and convince Peeta that Katniss was responsible for the destruction of Twelve, and I shall not do it." Her chin was held high. "There are some things I cannot bring myself to do, even if that means sacrificing myself."

"What if you brought Peeta back to Twelve?" Mr. Tanner suggested. "You could suggest it to Snow. Maybe seeing what was done will help to convince Peeta..."

"I refuse..."

"Miss. Trinket," he interrupted her. "Let me finish. You could tell Snow that seeing the destruction of his home...where his family died, may

help, but before that," he turned to face Effie. "Can you get a message to those people? Tell them you're going to be in Twelve? Then they can get you out."

"Are you really willing to help with the rescue of Peeta?"

"Not Peeta. You." Steven told her. "Of course, I can't allow Peeta to leave my custody, but they could capture you and take you back to...wherever they're hiding."

"What about the others?"

"I didn't sign up to protect the others," he glared at Effie. "You're my problem. Not them."

Effie gave this some careful consideration. If she could get Peeta to Twelve he might have a chance at survival. "I will only go if Peeta comes with me," Effie said with a straight and determined expression.

"Can't do that, Miss. Trinket. I can't willingly allow the escape of a rebel."

"What makes me so different?" Effie raised her voice.

"Told you before. I took an..."

"Oh, dear me. If you start speaking about that damn oath again I shall surely vomit." She pursed her lips. "If you want to save me, you must save Peeta. That is my deal. If not, I shall walk into Snow's office and inform him of what happened this evening."

"You'll do no such thing," Mr. Tanner glared at her as if calling her bluff.

Effie arched her brow and said, "I, like you, Mr. Tanner, am somewhat of an oddity. Unlike the rest of the people in the Capitol, I consider all

human life a valuable commodity. Some more than others, and Peeta..." She tried to explain in a way he could relate to. "Mr. Tanner you have sworn to protect me even if it means your own death. I have pledged my life to Katniss and Peeta Mellark. I will die for them."

He blew out a breath of exasperation and said, "You know they'll kill me once I let you two go."

"I shall take you with me. You can fight for the rebellion if you like or face their courts, which I'm sure are much fairer than President Snow's."

He let out a burst of laughter. "Other than you, I have no use for rebel scum. I'd gladly die before I let them take me into custody."

Effie pursed her lips, "Then I guess we've made our decision."

"Guess so." He looked over his shoulder before pulling out into the street. "I'll help you get Peeta out of here too, but that's it. The rest are on their own."

Effie felt her heart leap to her throat as she thought, 'No, they shall have me, and I shall have you Mr. Tanner.' Getting Peeta out of Snow's hands was her primary goal. Her second would be to return to the Capitol and get the rest of the prisoners out.

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Katniss held her breath as she walked down the corridors towards the medical bay wearing the clothing designated for each of thirteen's residents, swathed in one of Peeta's oversized sweaters. She kept her eyes straight ahead as she passed families returning to their quarters after their evening meal hoping that no one would pay attention to her. The door felt like it weighed about a hundred pounds as she pushed it open. "Regina?" Katniss looked around the empty room. Prim had told her to be here after dinner, but no one else was there. Katniss took a peek inside of the small exam room Regina had taken her into while her mother worked on her prep team to find that empty as well. The combination of silence and the stench of antiseptic left her thinking of the Capitol's medical facility after her first Games. The chair in the corner of the large exam room faced the door which enabled her to see who was entering. "Tell me I'm doing the right thing. I can't keep hiding this. If the wrong person finds out and tells Coin...I can't keep worrying about this. I have to stay focused, and hiding banana nut is becoming a problem. You'd think it would be easy considering I'm not showing, but..." she let out an exasperated sigh, "...how am I supposed to keep a secret when everyone here has implanted themselves in the middle of my life. It doesn't help that that damn DNA scanner screamed it out today either. Guess Regina didn't know about those security systems downstairs." She leaned her head against the wall and decided to stop complaining to Peeta. "Saw your message the other day," she smiled softly. "I love you too. If you only knew how much it meant to me to hear you say that...just to see you...knowing you were thinking about me...about the baby. We think about you all the time, and you'll be happy to know our trunks are now in my possession, as is the quilt you packed up for me, but I can't seem to find Peeta's Sunset. You didn't bring that back home did you? Maybe you did and forgot to tell me about it, but I could've sworn you..."

"Katniss?" The sound of Dr. Valero's voice interrupted her conversation with Peeta.

"Hi," she stopped moving her lips, and spoke to Peeta in her mind instead. 'Talk to you later. I've got to take care of this right now.'

"Thanks for meeting me." She got up and greeted Regina, Justus and Lavinia. "Is there someplace safe we can talk?"

Lavinia motioned with her hand for them to follow her into the private exam room, opened up a medical supply door and stepped inside.

"This is perfect." Katniss didn't know how to start the conversation, but it seemed Justus had plenty to say as his hands started moving a mile a minute. "What's he saying?" She asked.

"He wants to know if he should stand guard outside the door in case anyone comes," Regina signed as she spoke. "Katniss, do we need him to keep an eye out?"

"He'll want to hear this too, but...maybe..." She didn't know what to do.

"Justus, why don't you keep watch and I'll let you know what's been said afterward?" Regina ran her hand over his shoulder and looked at him with such an enormous amount of love that Katniss couldn't help the feelings of envy running through her. How she wished she could do that. Run her hand over Peeta's shoulder...thread her fingers through his...even the idea of standing next to him was welcomed.

"Regina," Katniss spoke softly. "I don't think we can continue this charade. One of my prep team members...I think she knows about the baby. That DNA scanner today... Everything is becoming so overwhelming, I can't keep track of the lies I'm telling. Even sticking my arm into the computerized terminal before each meal is giving me away. Do you know I've gained two pounds? Two pounds!"

"That's good, Katniss. You needed to put some weight on after leaving the arena. However, I see your point. President Coin has requested

that I supply one of the physicians here with your medical records for a second opinion, and Beetee kept asking me questions after I told him the blood we used on you may have affected your DNA scan," the amount of concern in Dr. Valero's voice told Katniss she wasn't the only one that had been worrying about this. "I've had to fudge a few records...hide some blood in case they go snooping into it, but it should be enough to keep them from questioning it for now."

"What do we do?" Katniss looked to Lavinia. "You should have never allowed them to use your medical records for me. Now they'll know you were part of this." The Avox shook her head frantically, squeezed Katniss' hand and moved her fingers.

Regina let out a little burst of air through her nostrils and said with pride, "She's spelling the words out with the alphabet. Give me a minute." Regina began translating for Lavinia, "I'm not worried about myself. I'm worried about you and the baby."

"Thank you, Lavinia, but I *am* worried. About all of us." Katniss gulped and said, "I think we should let President Coin know I'm still pregnant, and tell her that I'm willing to keep it to myself for as long as possible. That I'll still be her Mockingjay."

"No," Regina spoke and Lavinia signed out the letters N-O. "Katniss, if you want to wait until Peeta is rescued, I will agree to that, but telling her now will only give her a reason to hurt you." Once Peeta was back Katniss could step down from her position as Mockingjay. With any luck their president would be happy with him and leave Katniss alone to finish out her pregnancy.

Katniss looked down at the prominent bump underneath her doctor's clothing. "She won't hurt me while I'm in front of the camera, but she would hurt you...hurt Adam, wouldn't she?"

"Not the baby, but me...possibly...after I give birth. They're desperate for children here. With me being able to reproduce, perhaps she'd be lenient on me, but that's not the topic at hand. We need to figure out a way to disguise your condition until Peeta gets back and you can step down."

"How?"

"Continue doing your job as their Mockingjay...live your life as normally as possible, and leave the computer systems up to me and Justus. We'll figure something out." Regina took Katniss' hand. "Justus said the rebels are sending a radio message through the broadcast networks to let the rebels in the Capitol know they'll be proceeding with the rescue mission within the next day or two. District Four, Six and Seven has control over communications now, so it'll be difficult to trace it back here."

"I didn't know we still had rebels at the Capitol that were in a position to help," this was news to Katniss. "How many are there?"

"A few, but not many. Most escaped with the hovercraft." Lavinia began to spell something out for Regina to translate. "There are more people than you think on the rebel's side. Every Avox and working attendant would gladly fight on the rebel's side if given the chance."

"If we ever get to the Capitol to fight, I'll make sure to bring them some extra guns," Katniss said in an attempt to rid the tiny closet of gloom. "Peeta should be back within the next couple of days." There was a chance that he'd be dead by then, but Katniss refused to let it enter her mind. "The second he's back and on his feet..."

"I'll tell Coin myself," Regina told her. "I'll throw myself on her mercy...beg for forgiveness..."

"Tell her you know about the pox," Katniss grinned. "You know there aren't many residents of Thirteen that can still have children, and you were only thinking of the district's future." Katniss ran her hand over her stomach and said, "Better yet, let me tell her. You can be in the room, but I want to tell her I'm still pregnant in front of the rebels. Let her explain her orders to commit murder in front of them. Maybe they'll see her for who she really is."

"Do you really want to do that, Katniss? Make an enemy of another president?" Regina asked.

"It's my specialty," she said with a straight face. "Seems they all hate me."

Lavinia signed something to Regina who chuckled. "Well, you've got a fan in Lavinia," Regina said. "And two in Justus and myself." She ran her hand over her abdomen. "Three actually."

Katniss grinned at her. "That's a start. Maybe we could have Justus take Coin's place. A decent and fair president would be a nice change of pace."

"I'll let him know he's got your support, but he seems to think, and I agree, that Effie Trinket might be the best person to run this rebellion's efforts." Lavinia was nodding frantically.

"Once she's here, we'll bring it up with her." Katniss felt a lot better now that she talked things through with her own little band of rebels. "Any chance of me seeing banana nut while we're in here?"

"Absolutely. Prim brought your device in today, but I wasn't able to show her how to use it with all the hullabaloo." Regina pulled it out of her pocket and held it in front of Katniss' stomach. "What do you say we see how much it's grown?"

"I'd like that," Katniss began moving her lips. "Want to see banana nut, Peeta? We're almost at the ten week mark." She began repeating everything Regina told her to her missing husband in the hopes that he could sense she and the baby were all right.

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The nightmare that attacked Peeta's dreams froze him in place. His entire body was like a stiff board. His eyes zipped around the dank prison cell, his heart was beating out of his chest, and the sight of Darius' torture was still fresh in his mind. For a change, everything around him was crystal clear. There were no glowing edges surrounding the bars of his cell, or the prisoners. They had finally removed the dead mentor from District Six, but the man's blood was still pooled on the ground. The occasional snuffle was heard from Annie's jail cell, and Peeta worried about the woman Finnick loved so much. She was one of the few the Capitol barely questioned. When they did take her away, she was usually gone for about twenty minutes or less, then placed back in her holding cell. "Annie?" Peeta whispered. "You okay down there?"

"Yes," she squeaked out. "For the time being. How about yourself?"

"Had a hell of a nightmare, but I'm better now," Peeta answered.

"Peeta? Do you think we'll ever get out of here?"

"I know we will, Annie." Peeta had to believe it. "Right now, Katniss and Finnick are probably digging a tunnel into the jail to rescue us."

"Are you doing better with your memories of her?"

Peeta scooted to the edge of his cell and tried to make out the woman he was speaking to. The shadow of her body was all he could see.

"Sometimes when I dream, I know everything, and when I wake up...it's like nothing is wrong, but then I start to remember the things they've showed me...they've said, and..."

"You should concentrate on a good memory with her." Annie suggested. "Can you remember anything happy?"

"Yeah," at that moment in time he could remember almost everything about Katniss. The way he felt about her. The way her skin felt. Her hair. Her smile. How nervous she was the first time they met for lunch. "Did you know that Katniss and I started dating before the Games ever began?"

Annie shuffled closer to the bars of her cell. "No. I thought you two didn't know each other before the Games."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to believe everything you see on TV?" Peeta chuckled. "Most of what I said was true, about falling in love with her when I was a kid...me pretty much spending my entire life thinking she had no clue who I was, or that I existed." Peeta thought back to the moment everything changed between he and Katniss. "I actually told Katniss I had a crush on her when we got trapped in an elevator while touring the mines in our district. Don't ask me how I did it, but I convinced her to meet me for lunch the next day at school, but she wasn't allowed to date, and I didn't want to get her in trouble so I suggested a place close to the school, but far enough away that no one would see us." He rested his head against one of

the bars. "That first date was so nerve wracking. I was petrified she wouldn't show up."

"I'm guessing she did," Johanna's voice joined the conversation.

"Hey," Peeta smiled at his neighbor. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Yeah, because I was getting so much rest on this luxurious bed they've provided for me," Johanna said sarcastically. "What happened? Did she show up or what?"

"Yeah, she showed up. She even agreed to meet me the next day too." Peeta could picture the autumnal shades of the leaves of the oak tree. "You have no clue how long it took me to work up the nerve to hold her hand. I mean...I held it that day we were trapped in the elevator, but she was pretty scared, her dad died in those mines. Making a move like that while on a date...that was a whole other story."

They had been meeting under the tree for over a week, and everyday before Katniss would leave, Peeta would ask her to meet him for lunch again on the next school day except yesterday. It had crossed his mind that she might have been showing up because she felt obligated to, so Peeta figured he wouldn't ask her, yet he'd still show up, and maybe she would too. If she did, he was going to do it. He was going to hold her hand again, or at least try to. He hadn't even asked Delly to come with him that day just in case Katniss was a no show. Peeta waited for over ten minutes at the edge of the cluster of trees to the side of their normal meeting place, he hoped and prayed that the elusive Katniss Everdeen didn't let him down. When he saw her taking a leisurely stroll underneath the oak tree and looking around, he knew...he just knew, she actually liked him.

"You waiting for someone in particular?" He asked as he casually walked up to her.

"Oh," she turned to face him. "You're here. I um...I wasn't sure if...I mean you didn't ask me yesterday so I didn't know if you wanted to..." she crossed her arms over her chest. "Why didn't you ask me to lunch today?"

"Why didn't **you** ask **me** to lunch?" He countered.

She looked around before settling her sights on him. "Fair enough. Guess I could've done the asking too."

"Well, it seems we're both here, and we both have our lunches with us...think we should eat together?"

Katniss scowled at him. "Don't get cocky." She sat with her back against the tree. "What did you bring?"

"Stale bread and jam," Peeta answered. "You?"

"Rabbit and goat cheese."

"Hey, I love rabbit," Peeta reached for her bag to take a peek inside.

"You told me," Katniss reached for Peeta's bag and spread it out across the ground after emptying its contents. "I like this bread. What's it called again?"

"Cornbread. Tastes good with jam on it or with stew or soups or something like that." He hadn't felt so nervous since the first day he spent having lunch with her. "So...how's classes today? Ready for Beast's test?"

"Not really," Katniss separated their lunch into equal portions and began nibbling at the rabbit. "What's the point? Pass or fail, my future is already set in stone."

"Stop thinking that way, Katniss," Peeta spread a little goat cheese over a piece of rabbit and bit into it. "You have no clue what your future holds," he spoke with a full mouth. "For all you know you could marry a man from town and work in his business." He hadn't realized what he was insinuating until Katniss stopped moving and stared straight ahead. "I'm not saying that...I mean...you could always wind up marrying...or not marrying...maybe you could..." Peeta dropped his rabbit onto the bag Katniss had set in front of him as a plate. "I sound like an imbecile don't I?"

"You said it. Not me." She glanced at him. "Maybe we should just eat."

"Sure." Peeta didn't say a word to her until he was finished with his lunch. "These are usually the best meals of my day. I don't normally get this much food at home."

"Really?" She gave him a strange look.

"Mmmm hmmm," he wiped his greasy fingers on his pant leg. "Don't have any napkins, but you can use my pants if you want."

"That's okay. I'll use my bag." She was quiet for a couple of seconds then asked, "So you really don't get to eat the stuff you bake?"

"If we did that, how would we make any money?"

"Guess I never thought about it that way before." Katniss wrapped up their trash and placed it to the side. "Always thought you merchant kids got a lot more food than those of us from the Seam."

"Suppose I do get more than most people from the Seam, but not you. I think you're probably the best fed family in Twelve, other than the Undersees and Haymitch Abernathy." Peeta chuckled to himself. "From what I've seen of that guy though, he pretty much drinks all of his meals."

"Can you imagine that?" Katniss leaned her head back against the tree. "Having all that money and wasting it away on alcohol. I'd never do that."

"What would you do if you had as much money as him?" He was curious as to what she'd spend her money on. Would she buy something personal or spend it all on her family?

Peeta watched her face as she took careful consideration of his question then answered, "Make sure there was always food on the table, coal for the stove, and I'd probably buy some napkins so you could wipe your fingers on something other than your clothes everyday," Katniss gave him one of her rare smiles.

"Forget the napkins. I'd rather have the food and coal." Peeta grinned back at her. "I'd buy art supplies."

"What?!" Katniss turned her entire body towards him. "Why on earth would you buy something like that?"

"Why not?" Peeta shrugged. "Hey, it's my fantasy. Don't ruin it with logic."

Katniss let out a little snort of laughter. "Oh, well if we're fantasizing... I'd buy the best bow ever made."

"There you go," Peeta scooted closer to her. "Something really fancy made out of... What are they made out of?"

"Depends. My father carved all of mine out of wood."

"Wow. I bet people would pay a lot of money for something like that."

"Don't really need a lot of money to survive, so I try not to worry about it too much," Katniss said with a straight face then laughed. The sound of it caused a chill to run up Peeta's spine. "Could you imagine? Me not worrying about money?"

"Yeah, that would be the day." Peeta knew that was pretty much all she was concerned about. "Providing for your family is all you know how to do, Katniss. It's who you are. I bet if you were rich like Abernathy, you'd still sneak into the woods so you could bring home game."

"I like fresh meat," she shrugged. "Fish. I love fish."

*"Me too, but we hardly ever get any. It's too expensive." Peeta picked up a twig and started doodling in the dirt. "You know what I'd really do if I had that kind of money?" he turned his attention to Katniss. "I'd make sure you never had to worry about providing for your family again, and **then** I'd buy art supplies."*

"Why would you do that?" Katniss asked him with a serious expression across her face.

"I love to sketch...paint... It..."

"Not that. I meant, why would you make sure my family was provided for?" Katniss started to fiddle with the lace on her boot. "You have your own family to worry about."

"My family would do just fine without me," Peeta said sadly. "Yours would too, but...I don't know...I think I'd like taking care of you instead"

of you having to take care of everyone else for a change. If you think about it, you've been feeding my family for years. I know none of us Mellark men are going out and hunting squirrel."

"That's silly. Your dad makes trades with me. I'm not taking care of your family." She almost looked offended. "And I make fair trades too."

"Never said you didn't," Peeta worried that he said something for her to take offense at. "I didn't mean anything by saying I would take care of you and your family, Katniss. Just thought it would feel good to do something nice for someone else. That's all."

"I know." she started gnawing at her bottom lip. "Peeta, you know I'm never getting married, right?"

"You've said it on more than one occasion." He wondered if he should have said anything about wanting to take care of her and her family at all.

"That means I can't really have a boyfriend either."

This caused major concern for him. "Just because two people date doesn't mean they have to get married or anything." Now he was certain he shouldn't have said anything. "Katniss," scaring her off was not his intention, "you're not going to stop coming to lunch with me now, are you?"

Her worried expression frightened Peeta. "We said friends...we'd be friends."

"I know, but..." Peeta took a deep breath and timidly took her hand in his, "...I don't want to be just your friend, Katniss."

Her fingers lay limply between the palms of his hands. "I...I shouldn't be here." Katniss pulled her hand from his and hopped to her feet. "We shouldn't have..." her head began to shake back and forth, "...I don't want this!" Peeta stood in her way before she could dart off. He wasn't sure if it was fear or anger in her eyes. "You told me we could...friends, Peeta! Friends!"

'Anger,' Peeta realized, 'She's definitely mad at me.' "I didn't mean to scare you or anything."

"Scare me?!" She glared at him. "I'm not afraid of...of..." she lifted his hand in hers to prove a point, "...I'm not afraid of some...boy. See?" She wound her fingers through his. "I can hold hands if I want to."

*"So you **want** to hold my hand?" Peeta was a little nervous about facing her fury head on, but he had to admit, her fiery temper was one of the reasons he found her so fascinating.*

"NO!" She threw his hand down to the side. "I don't want anything from you. Nothing!" Her arms crossed her chest.

"Felt like you wanted to hold my hand," Peeta stepped closer to her.

"Well...I didn't." Katniss eyes kept traveling down towards them.

"Maybe you're just afraid of the way it makes you feel?" Peeta wasn't sure if he should challenge her until he saw a flicker of recognition flash in her eyes. It suddenly dawned on him, that Katniss Everdeen, the girl that stared down the Capitol's laws and braved the woods on a daily basis, was afraid of him. Him. Peeta Mellark, the baker's son. "Maybe," he took another step towards her, "you actually like the way your hand feels in mine, and it scares you?"

Katniss' back was up against the tree. "Told you already, I'm not afraid of a boy."

Peeta nodded his head, "Yeah, that's what you said, but I don't believe you."

"I already held your hand once," she lifted her gray eyes but avoided his blue ones.

"Did you like it?" He hoped she did.

The tip of her tongue darted out from between her lips to moisten her dry mouth. "It was nice," she said quietly.

"Nice?" He wasn't sure where his courage to face her was coming from, but he seemed to have it in spades.

"Yes," Katniss faced him with determination in her voice. "Nice! It was nice!"

He reached out and touched the end of her braid with one finger. He always wondered what her hair felt like. "I liked it too," he ducked his head down a little. "I liked it a lot, Katniss, and I wouldn't mind doing it again." He held his hand out to her with the palm facing up in invitation.

"Stop it," she was having trouble holding his gaze. "I don't want..."

"I know. You don't want this, but I do. I've wanted it my whole life."

"That...that right there," Katniss pointed at him. "That's what I'm talking about. You act like you're in love with me and we barely know each other."

*Peeta had no clue how to explain that he **was** in love with her, and knew more than she could possibly imagine. "Haven't you ever had a gut feeling about something before? Like you knew it was supposed to be?"*

"You want too much from me." Katniss closed her eyes and shook her head. "If I agree to this..." she opened her eyes, "...do you know how hard that would be for me considering I pretty much wrote this type of thing off when I was eleven?"

*"But think of how great it could be if you opened yourself up to it...gave it...**us** a chance." The need to reach out and touch her was overwhelming. Instead he pushed his open palm towards her, asking...begging for her to take the next step.*

*Katniss dropped her arms and let them hang limply to her sides. "What if my mom finds out? What if **yours** finds out?"*

"We won't tell anyone." He could see her slowly giving into her emotions.

"Peeta..." Her voice was barely above a whisper as she slowly shook her head from side to side. "I can't have this type of relationship."

"Hold my hand, Katniss." If he could just get her to feel what he felt, even for a second.

"You don't get it," she kept looking at the palm of his hand, "this whole boyfriend/girlfriend thing isn't me. I can't afford to...to..." she took a deep breath and let it out.

"Hold my hand," Peeta tenderly insisted. "One minute. That's all I ask. Hold it for one minute and if you want to let it go, then I'll never bring this up again."

"I...I can't." She swallowed.

He had watched her his whole life and knew the one thing she'd respond to was a challenge. "Why not?"

"Because..." she tried to answer, but her voice barely came out.

Peeta took one more step towards her. Their feet were toe to toe. His hand still out, waiting for hers to complete their link. "Because why?" It was time to present his case and see how she reacted. "It's only sixty seconds Katniss. Besides...you were the one that said you weren't afraid of a boy. That's all I am. A boy who would like to hold a girl's hand."

Finally her eyes locked onto his and didn't budge. "Okay," she breathed out, "but you have to count to sixty. Not one second more."

"I will." The instant her hand met his a bolt of electricity shot through him and counting to sixty seemed like a chore. "One, two, three, four..." His breath felt like it was trapped inside of his lungs.

"Five, six..." her shoulders did a little shake when he brushed his thumb against the inside of her wrist. "Um...ten...Peeta?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "Thirteen..."

"Fifteen." she stopped counting for a moment as her eyes delved into his. "I forgot what I was going to say."

"Seventeen." He brushed a piece of hair away from her mouth and became entranced by the fullness of her lips, the tiny little pants coming out from between them, and her nose...he had never gotten the chance to look at her so closely, and he wasn't going to pass it up. "You have freckles."

"Twenty-five... Yeah. A few."

He tilted his head to the side, and memorized each one's shape...color. "I think I knew already, but I've never seen them this close up before."

"You have the longest eyelashes I've ever seen." The words seemed to spill out of her mouth without her knowing.

The thumping inside of his chest was so loud, he was afraid Katniss would hear it and run for the woods. "My eyelashes?"

Katniss nodded her head. "They're really long and curly."

"The end of your nose tilts up a little," Peeta began telling her all the things he was discovering about her. "Your skin is like a perfect shade of ivory...flawless."

"Freckles," Katniss gulped. "Those are flaws."

"To you maybe, but to me they just add color to your perfect canvas." His eyes scanned her features taking them in one by one until they landed on two pools of silver mist. "Your eyes are...wow. I used to imagine them looking at me like this, but it was always a dream. Never thought I'd actually have Katniss Everdeen looking back at me this way."

"How...how am I looking at you?"

He didn't know how to explain it without scaring her again then he realized neither one of them were counting anymore. "You're looking at me like time is standing still."

"Oh," she licked her lips again. "I don't want a boyfriend," she lifted his hand to her cheek and rubbed it against her skin.

"I know, but I think you've got one." Peeta watched her as her mouth began to open and close, but nothing came out. "Say something."

"I'm not good at saying something," her brow furrowed.

*If she would only scream...yell...anything, but continue to stand there frozen in place. It was petrifying Peeta. "Then **do** something."*

Katniss rubbed her free fingers nervously under her nose, licked her lips one last time, swallowed the giant lump in her throat and said, "I'm good at doing something." She found his other hand and held it, squeezed it in her own.

Peeta grinned at her. "Really?" He asked her eagerly knowing what her simple gesture suggested. "You mean it, Katniss?"

"I mean it." She pulled both of their hands together between them and rested her cheek on them. "I really don't want to be someone's girlfriend."

"You're not someone's girlfriend." Peeta opened up his hand and tenderly caressed her cheek. "You're mine."

Katniss covered his hand with hers and looked into his eyes. "I'm not getting married."

"I won't propose unless you ask me to first," he gave her a playful grin.

"Since that will never happen...I can live with that," she grinned back. In all the years he had known her he had never seen her smile as much as she did that day. "Peeta, will you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"No," his face took on a serious expression as he shook his head. "But I'll have lunch with you every day until we graduate, and after

that...well you'll be begging me to propose to you by then so..." he shrugged his shoulder and smiled.

"Funny. Very funny." She smiled back at him. "It's Thursday," she sighed.

"Yeah," Peeta tilted his head to the other side to get a new angle, brushed his thumb across her bottom lip, and fought the desire to kiss her. "The week is almost over."

Her hand pressed his against her cheek as she said into his eyes, "Weekends are going to suck."

"But we'll have Monday through Friday and...we...uh..." Peeta rested his forehead against hers and said, "Yeah. Weekends are going to suck." The sound of the school bell rang in the distance. "Time for class."

"Go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

The sounds and scents of autumn filled the air. Crackling of dried leaves, pine drifting off of Katniss' skin, the few birds that had yet to migrate chirping in the air. To Peeta, this was as perfect as life had ever been. "I don't want to go to class," he never wanted to let go of her hand.

"You've never been late to class, and I'm not going to be a bad influence on you." She rubbed her cheek against his palm, gave his hand one last squeeze then released it. "We'll meet here tomorrow. I'll ask Madge to sacrifice her sanity and eat lunch with Delly again."

"Hey, Delly's great." Peeta took a step back from her so he could head back to the school building before the tardy bell rang. "She's always smiling. How can you not like that?"

"Go to class, Peeta."

"I'm going." He took a few more steps away from her. "I don't want to go. I want to stay here with you."

Katniss clapped her hands over her cheeks. "Get out of here before we're both late."

"Are you blushing Miss. Everdeen?" Peeta called to her from a few yards away.

"GO!"

He made Katniss Everdeen blush. A miraculous feat. "Red is very becoming on you."

"Get out of here!" She dropped her hands. "Now or I'll dump you. It'll be the shortest relationship in history!"

Peeta's brows shot up when he heard what she said, "We're in a relationship, Katniss. You and me!" He chuckled. "Holy cow!"

"Don't make me regret it." She lifted up her hand and waved at him.

*Katniss Everdeen had just agreed to be his girlfriend. As far as Peeta was concerned, he could die a happy man now. "I'll see **you** tomorrow." He ripped his gaze away from her and jogged to class. His plan on staring at her during Beast's test began to form in the back of his mind.*

"That was the happiest moment of my life," Peeta ran his hand down one of the bars that imprisoned him and let out a soft sigh. "After that, it just got better and better."

"Until you were both reaped," Johanna brought Peeta back to reality.

"Yeah." Peeta said with sorrow in his voice, "Until we were both reaped."

"Peeta?" Annie's voice came from the darkness. "Do you remember the way you felt about her?"

He gave it some thought and said, "Yeah. I do." It was strange considering the way his mind had been working lately. "I'm not sure why, but she always seems so close to me at night. Like she's right here by my side. I'm not even upset with her right now."

"Then we'll have to fix that, won't we Mr. Mellark?" The sound of President Snow's voice filtered through some speakers in his cell. "Bring him to me!" Snow's voice barked and a handful of Peacekeepers entered the prison stomping their boots towards Peeta's cell.

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The trunks that were brought to Katniss and Peeta's quarters were opened, items spilling out of them onto the ground, and a combination of hostility and anguish filled her heart. She paced around her room trying to figure out what to do with everything Peeta had packed away for her. Did she use the items? Did she put them away until he got back? Simply seeing things from home left her heartbroken. 'This is ridiculous,' she thought to herself. 'It's stuff. Stuff!' Yet it bothered her

to no end having it around. A reminder of what she had lost. "Why did you do this?" She began to have a conversation with her missing husband, then thought better of it remembering Regina's advice. "Fine!" She yelled out. "Where's that damn book?" She began looking around her quarters until she saw it lying closed on her table. Katniss picked it up along with a pen and sat down to write. 'So what do you write?' She asked herself. 'Are you really going to yell at Peeta in print?' She began scribbling down useless things. *"Prim is good. Your dad is fine. Mom is..."* Katniss had to think, *"...honestly I don't know how my mom is. I think she's keeping things from me."* Katniss stood up and let out a loud, "Ugh!" She wanted to tell him how she felt without him around, but she didn't know how. Once again she took the pen in hand and pretended she was writing him a letter.

"Dear Peeta, Life in Thirteen sucks." She placed the end of the pen in her mouth and tried to think of something else to write. *"Prim's going to be a doctor."* She knew she should expand on that, but the words wouldn't come to her so she moved on. *"My prep team's here. They've been treated pretty badly."* Again she was at a loss. How did she describe the wounds her prep team suffered? In the back of her mind she could imagine Peeta telling her to tell him a story. *"I can't figure out what to say or how to say it,"* she wrote. *"I know you'd want me to tell you a story, but I don't know how to do it when I'm writing. We've been through so much together and now I can't even face a piece of paper and a pen without wanting to cry. It's like when Prim told me earlier that I needed to tell people who I am and I told her it didn't matter because you weren't here."* Katniss stopped writing to Peeta and flipped the page, jotted a few things down, scratched them out, and started writing again. Before she knew it her fingers began flying across the page expressing the things she really wanted to say in a way she never knew she could. When all was said and done she read over what she wrote, stuck the pen between the pages and slammed the book closed. She'd have to find a place to hide it where no one

could see what had poured out of her. She looked at her trunks and shoved the book between a blanket, packed the items back into the trunks and told herself she'd have to find a hiding spot for all of their belongings. None of it was meant for their sleeping quarters. Katniss gave herself a new project, one that would keep her mind occupied. It was time to search out a place she and Peeta could call home while living in Thirteen.

The hallways usually had guards patrolling up and down them, and now that Katniss' entire family had moved to one of the upper levels of Thirteen they had to designate one specific guard for their floor. She waited, peeking out a crack in her door, until the woman left to go somewhere, and made her escape. The stairwells led to the housing Thirteen provided, but Katniss didn't want to stay in that section. She needed to get away from all of these people. She rushed down empty corridors until she found a different flight of stairs marked, Do Not Enter. 'Yeah. Right. That's going to keep me out,' she thought to herself as she pushed the door open. Each floor had two doors to exit, one led to the long corridor that took you to the residential area and the other to another hallway, only these were dark and desolate. "It's deserted," Katniss whispered to herself when she opened one of the doors and saw nothing but an abandoned room. Each one was just as empty as the last. Just as deserted and dark. She wondered why no one lived in this section of Thirteen. There was nothing wrong with the quarters she visited. They all had beds, tables, chairs, a few had cribs. She stopped next to one and placed her hand against the mattress, picked up a handmade doll that was sitting in the corner of the crib and tried to figure out where the people that had lived there went. Had they moved to the section of Thirteen she was currently in? Did they leave Thirteen all together? There was clothing in a drawer that looked normal. Not like the matching uniforms everyone wore now. A picture that a child had drawn was pinned on the wall next to a box with square blocks inside of it. The colors faded with age. 'Toys?' She

asked herself. She wandered in and out of the rooms, all of them had been lived in at one point or another, yet abandoned. She traveled downstairs to another level and found a dozen more rooms like the ones on the upper floors then decided to head back to her own quarters to think about what she had discovered. On her way back she stopped at one final doorway. This one was marked President's Quarters. 'Coin lives here?' The thought was quickly pushed aside when she noticed a mouse scurrying across the floor of the hall. There was no way Coin would ever room with vermin. Katniss placed her hand upon the cold doorknob and slowly twisted. Inside she found three adjoining rooms plus a bath. Again she could tell that someone had once lived there, but who she had no clue. The closets in one of the bedrooms were bare. The bed was stripped of its bedding leaving only a mattress and its foundation. The dresser drawers held some clothing, a man's pants...a woman's blouse... The other bedroom, Katniss deduced, belonged to a girl. The clothes that hung in the closet were feminine, yet a sense of youth was woven into them. A perfectly tied bow, added after the fact from what Katniss could tell by the stitching and the colors that didn't quite match, hung limp from the collar of a thin sweater. The main room was the size of her entire sleeping quarters. There was an inch or more of dust layered on top of a basic wooden desk. Upon examination Katniss could tell that someone had built it by hand out of pine wood. A tiny area was set up with a sink, faucet and table top stove burners that resembled the one she had in Victor's Village. Katniss turned a knob and the element took on a bright orange glow, heat shot up from it. "You could cook here," she spoke quietly as she shut the burner off. "What happened here?" she hadn't a clue, but she was determined to find out. She walked up and down the halls counting how many vacant homes were there. "Seventy-two not including the President's Quarters," which she decided would be perfect for what she had in mind. It took awhile to get back to her floor without being noticed by security, but once there

she lay in bed thinking about the hidden secrets of District Thirteen, and what the best way to discover its past would be.

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"How many did you say there were?" Prim asked quietly as she gave Katniss her morning snack before breakfast.

"Seventy-two...well, three if you include the President's area." Katniss spooned some mashed rutabaga into her mouth. "This is disgusting."

"Then you won't care about puking it up," Prim began searching through Katniss' drawers until she found what she was looking for. "Okay," she took the piece of paper and pencil then started working out some math problems. "All of them looked like they were family residences?"

"Yeah," Katniss answered with a mouth full of rutabaga. "Grotesque. This is...mmm...so...mmm... I can't stop eating it. Is there more downstairs?"

"I think so," Prim answered. "Figure the average family here has two parents and four kids."

"There aren't that many families though." Katniss sipped at some of the tea Prim brought to her.

"I'm not thinking about now...I'm thinking about years ago." Prim bit the corner of her bottom lip. "Back when that pox hit them. I'm not sure how many kids they had on average back then."

"The rooms only held about three or four people," Katniss scraped up the last bits of vegetables from her bowl. "You think the people that used to live there had that pox?"

"Don't know, but the families out here are encouraged to have as many children as possible." Prim put the pencil down. "Now, if they're so concerned about waste, why would they want these people to keep having kids? Wouldn't that use more resources?"

Katniss took a seat next to Prim. "Because they want to go on...survive. You can't do that if you're not reproducing."

"Let's figure four people to a family," Prim tapped the pencil's eraser to her lips and did some multiplication. "That's two hundred and ninety two people. Where'd they go?"

"And why are their quarters blocked off?" Katniss asked.

"I think it's time I start digging through some medical records...find out what really happened to these people, and why we're not supposed to let on about that pox thing," Prim said through squinted eyes.

"You think there's more to it?" Katniss tilted her head down. "Oh God."

"You okay?" Prim got up and wrapped her arm around her sister.

"Yeah...no..." Katniss ran to the bathroom.

"I'm going to wait out here," Prim called to her after the door was slammed in her face. "Hmmm..." she scratched at her temple. "Think I should talk to Dr. Valero about this?" She asked through the door and

made a face when she heard the effects the vegetables had on Katniss. Though most things like this never bugged Prim, hearing her sister do it was kind of disgusting. "Katniss, I'm coming in." It was so much easier for Prim to see what was wrong instead of imagining it.

"No...oh..." Katniss' baby was wreaking havoc on her system, and Prim couldn't take it anymore.

"For goodness sake, I'm going to be a doctor," she opened the bathroom door and sat on the edge of the tub behind her sister's slumped over body. "I take it the baby doesn't like rutabaga." Prim grinned a little at the thought of Katniss still being pregnant and said, "Note to self: Don't bring rutabaga to Katniss anymore."

"This baby doesn't like anything," Katniss let out a breath, stood up, rinsed out her mouth before brushing and splashed water on her face. "Peeta's right. It's going to be a girl and it's going to be just like me. Never pleased by a damn thing."

Prim let out a little giggle. "I'll see about pleasing you today. I'm going to mention the pox to Dr. Valero and see if we can get some answers. From what's inside the medical records, most people were left sterile, but what if it actually killed people? And where did it come from? They live underground. How did it develop here?" Prim took a peek at her sister who looked much better. "Do you have a feeling like we're not being told everything?"

"Oh, I know we're not. These people have more secrets than President Snow." Katniss wiped her hands on a towel. "Let's go. This bathroom stinks and I'm starving."

"Dr. Valero wanted me to tell you she and Justus hacked the computer's systems, and you won't have to worry when you shove your arm in before each meal. Your weight will never change, but your

nutritional needs might...well, they will, but no one will need to know. She's still not sure what to do about that DNA scanner. Apparently Beetee is in charge of their security down there and they can't hack into it."

"That's okay. Don't think I'll be making very many visits to Beetee." Katniss held the door to her quarters open.

"Justus said they have those scanners in all of their top secret areas," Prim rolled her eyes. "Whatever that means. You'd think we were living amongst a bunch of spies or something. They're so paranoid."

"No, Prim," Katniss said to her. "They're scared. These people shouldn't be here, yet they are, and if Snow finds out, he'll probably try and level the facility."

"Isn't that why it's underground? In case the Capitol attacks?"

"So you think Snow already knows about Thirteen?" Katniss asked.

"You think he *doesn't* know?" Prim ate as quickly as possible, said farewell to Katniss and took off for her morning duties in Dr. Valero's medical bay. The morning was quiet, so Prim explained what Katniss found and her thoughts on the pox. "Anyway, I was thinking, maybe we should take a look at some of those records...see if it was just a sterilization thing or if there were any deaths involved."

"Prim, if they had some form of illness here that killed off that many families, they're not going to leave it out for anyone to see. Especially a doctor from the Capitol," Regina said to her. "We're going to have to look in the records of the deceased."

"Where do they keep those?" Prim wondered aloud. "No ones died since we've been here."

"One person has," Dr. Valero arched her brow. "Or so they think."

"Katniss' baby," Prim whispered.

"Uh huh," Dr. Valero nodded. "I had to create a file for it. An actual paper file. I was told to create one up for the computer's system, and then..." she looked around and lowered her voice down even more, "...then I was told to write one up and put it in the records of the deceased, but they wanted the truth, not the falsified information about the miscarriage." Prim had no clue what the doctor was talking about, and decided that silence was the way to get the most out of her. "President Coin told me they'd need Katniss' real medical records in case something happened during the war, so I had to write one up about the abortion I supposedly performed, and add..."

"Abortion?" Prim panicked. "Katniss wanted an abortion?"

Dr. Valero's entire face drained of blood. "When you told me you knew about the baby, I assumed... Katniss didn't tell you?" Regina closed her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No. You needed to tell me. Katniss said it would be dangerous if I knew," Prim was starting to catch up. "It wasn't my sister that wanted one at all was it?"

"Prim, you should forget about all of this. You're too young to be doing any of these things." The doctor walked to a desk drawer and took out tray filled with specimens. "We should get to work."

"Dr. Valero," Prim placed her hand on the woman's arm. "If President Coin wanted my sister's baby dead...the things she said during that mandatory meeting yesterday... What if she wants Katniss dead too?"

Dr. Valero's eyes closed, her head dropped back, her hand to her stomach. "She needs Katniss."

"Only until Peeta shows up, and then what?" Prim paused before adding, "An unfortunate accident during some battle?"

"Katniss would never agree to go out into the war zone," Dr. Valero turned towards Prim. "Would she?"

"Katniss will do whatever she needs to if she thinks it will bring Peeta back and keep their baby alive," Prim answered. "Even if that means going into the field of battle."

"But how can..." Regina lowered down her voice, "...how can that protect her baby?"

"You didn't see that uniform Cinna created for her. She'd probably feel safer walking around a war zone in that than here in those gray uniforms." The need to find Katniss became overwhelming. "Where is she today? Did she tell you anything?"

Regina shook her head. "No, but Justus said they were called in for a special meeting right after breakfast by Haymitch. He wanted to discuss Katniss' propos, but that was at least two or three hours ago."

Both women exchanged concerned looks then left the medical bay in a rush. "What should we say? Maybe stop by the kitchen and bring her a snack? Lunch is coming up?" Prim worried.

"I'll say I need to run some tests on her because of that scanner yesterday," Regina's pregnant waddle was having a hard time keeping up with Prim's youthful strides.

"Finnick?" Prim called down the hall to him. "He really shouldn't be walking around in his hospital gown," she whispered to Regina.

"They keep calling him in for meetings, and he just takes off without thinking," Dr. Valero caught up with the man. "How are you feeling?" She checked his pulse.

"Good. I think I'm ready to be released from the hospital now." Finnick answered as Prim's eyes scanned the hall. "You looking for someone?" He asked her.

"My...my sister. We need to run some tests on her." Prim answered.

"She's gone. Left for District Eight about ten minutes ago." Finnick continued speaking without taking a beat. "Listen, I think it's time I'm released from here Doc. Katniss still has problems and you released her. I think..."

Prim sucked in a breath, clapped her hand over her mouth and tried to keep her tears from falling.

"Why..." Regina stayed composed. "Why did they send her to Eight?"

"She's going to film a propos. Anyway I'd be happy to come visit you each day, I'm sure you'd like that too. Who wouldn't want a visit from Finnick Odair? Just let me out of this hospital."

"Of course I'd be willing to do that once I run a few more tests on you. Why don't you go back to your room and we'll be in shortly." Dr. Valero stood silently in the hall. Dread consuming her entire system.

"They sent her to Eight," Prim leaned against a wall. "She didn't even say goodbye." She sniffed as the tears started to fall from her eyes. "She didn't even say goodbye." And just like that Primrose Everdeen

was twelve again consumed by the same feelings of dread as when her name was drawn from a reaping ball.

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 8: Song of the Mockingjay, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Seven: Song of the Mockingjay

Katniss has left to film a propos in District Eight. Peeta remembered her clearly and was called in to face Snow. What will his punishment be? Effie was put in charge of hijacking Peeta, and her security guard figured out she was a rebel spy. Has he

informed the president or will he keep his word and help to get Effie and Peeta out of the Capitol?

Hello one and all. I have been a busy beaver. Chapter eight is finished and being given some tweaks prior to my sending it off the the betas. THANKS S AND A! I'm not worthy. Thank you to all of you that have been reading and reviewing. Please feel free to subscribe to my tumblr page to see updates at least a day or two before they are posted here. I enjoy giving everyone a sneak peek into my wacky mind. jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com.

Don't know about you, but I'm wondering what the heck is happening in the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Being summoned to the command center was nothing new for Katniss, but being summoned by Haymitch was. The second she entered she couldn't help but notice the odd assortment of people in the room. Her nextdoor neighbor from the Seam, Leevy, Greasy Sae, her prep team, Plutarch, Fulvia, people from District Thirteen that Katniss had never met, Gale, Justus, and a cattle expert from District Ten named Dalton. Katniss had spoken with him a few times during meals. One of their first conversations popped into her head the moment she laid eyes on him.

"They need us more than we need them," Dalton was speaking in a hushed tone of voice explaining his theory on why the people of Thirteen were so willing to share their resources with strangers. "They had some kind of illness that left many of them sterile. They look at us as breeding stock."

Katniss hadn't even thought of the conversation with the man until she saw him in the command center that morning. 'If he knows about it,

then why is that doctor so determined to keep it a secret?' Her question went unanswered the second President Coin entered and Haymitch began addressing the room.

"Plutarch pull those recordings up," Haymitch stood by the large television screen and made the entire room watch Katniss' failure while trying to act out the script that had been provided for her the day before. "Would anyone like to argue that this is of no use to us winning the war?" Haymitch asked the room, but no one argued that the recordings were horrible. "Now, let's watch this," Haymitch gave Plutarch a nod and a recording began to play of Katniss speaking with Prim about Peeta and President Snow.

Her eyes flew open when she saw...heard what was being played for all to see. Katniss had no clue the camera was still on her while she went on her little diatribe against Snow...against the Capitol. She was embarrassed by her reaction to being made up to look like a glamorous soldier, took a peek at her prep team who seemed unaffected by her complaining during the recording, and attempted to defend herself the second it was through. "I didn't mean anything about..."

Haymitch's hand shot up in a manner which suggested that she should keep her mouth shut. "Now this...this is the girl we need to see. The one that actually moves you." He walked slowly around the room and spoke to everyone, "Can anyone think of an instance where Katniss...and I'm not talking about her shooting an arrow, or Peeta getting you to like her, I'm talking about the girl herself...can you think of an example of when *her* actions actually moved you?"

No one said a word, and Katniss thought, 'Told you, Gale. Peeta and my prep team were responsible for my success in the arena, not me.'

"When she volunteered for Prim at the reaping," Leevy spoke up.

"Excellent," Haymitch jotted it down on a piece of paper. "Anyone else?"

To Katniss' surprise Boggs, the man that elbowed Gale in the nose, spoke up, "When she sang the song after the little girl died."

"When she drugged Peeta so she could get his medicine at the feast," a stranger from Thirteen spoke up.

" Sang song. Sleep syrup," Haymitch added it to his list.

It was odd for Katniss listening to people talk about her like she wasn't even in the room. "I cried when she finally told Peeta she loved him. She told him to read her lips and then mouthed I love you." Octavia blurted out, then clamped her hand over her own mouth in fear that she may have said too much.

Katniss remembered it well. She ran through the wooded arena after the Gamemakers announced the death of another tribute. Katniss was sure it was Peeta until she smacked right into him.

She saw the clump of berries he held in his hand and smacked them down to the ground. "That's nightlock, Peeta! You'd be dead in a minute!" She threw her arms around his neck and tried to control her sobbing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Peeta squeezed her and held her close. "I didn't know. Shhh...I'm okay." He stroked her hair. "I'm sorry."

She was certain the sound of the cannon had meant Peeta's death. The sight of the deadly berries piled up next to the rest of their food Peeta left on a rock, and the Capitol's signal that a tribute was dead was torture for Katniss. When her father died she didn't think she could ever experience that kind of pain again. It was the most

traumatic event she'd ever gone through...until she thought that Peeta had died. Her heart was overflowing with grief at the thought of having to go on without Peeta. Living without him was unfathomable. The rush of emotion that went through her when she held him against her, brought her to her senses. "I love you, Peeta." She kissed his ear. His cheek. "I love you," she choked out between cries.

Peeta cupped her cheeks and pulled her face away from his in order to look into her eyes. "Katniss?"

*She gripped the back of his jacket and saw the question in his eyes asking if this was for the viewing audience or if she meant it. She needed to tell him...to let **him** know how she felt. "Read my lips, Peeta." She mouthed the words, "I love you. I love you."*

"Good. Good," Haymitch wrote it down, "told Peeta she loved him." Haymitch held the pad up in his hand and said, "The question is, what do these things and that recording," he pointed to the screen, "have in common?"

"They're all Katniss. Just Katniss. No one telling her what to say or how to say it," Gale spoke knowingly.

"Unscripted! Yes!" Beetee said aloud and Katniss wondered when he and Finnick showed up. "We should just leave you alone, Right?" Beetee reached out and patted Katniss' hand.

"That's all well and good, but it's not very helpful," Fulvia spoke the voice of reason apprehensively. "There aren't many opportunities for her to show these sides of herself here in Thirteen. So unless you're willing to throw her into the middle of combat..."

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting!" Haymitch pointed at Fulvia.

Katniss was trying to get a grasp on what Haymitch and some of the others were suggesting. Many people in the room didn't think it was wise, but most of them thought it was a great idea. Katniss on the other hand knew she couldn't do it.

"I think it's a great idea, but we've got one big problem here. People in the nation think she's still pregnant," Gale pointed out.

'Thank you, Gale. That should shut them down,' Katniss thought to herself.

"We can spread the word that she's lost the baby," Plutarch spoke about it in passing. "Very sad, but it does happen."

Katniss could feel her airway starting to constrict, her heart begin to thump violently against her chest while everyone around thought Plutarch's suggestion was fine, they blew past it and debated whether or not she should be going into battle as though her child's life...death was nothing more than a footnote. "Stop," she whispered, but no one paid any attention to her. "Stop," she said it again only louder this time.

"You okay, Catnip?" Gale leaned close to her, "You don't look too good."

"Stop it!" Katniss got to her feet and yelled out putting an instant silence to the current debate. "I...I can't go." She knew everyone would be questioning where the brave girl they had just described had disappeared to, but there wasn't any way she could go into battle. She looked to Haymitch for help, but he was the one that suggested she go out and fight. If it were just her, she'd do it. She wanted to do it, but it wasn't only her life she had to worry about. She quickly racked her brains, thinking up an excuse to get her out of the situation. "How could you want me to go out and kill people again?"

"No. No, sweetheart," Haymitch rushed around the table to her side. "I'm not asking you to go out and kill people. *Meet* people. We can find an area that's fairly safe."

"We're at war, Haymitch. No place is safe." Katniss had to tell them. She had to.

"Are you backing out of your deal to be the Mockingjay, Katniss?" Coin asked her through a narrowing stare.

"No," Katniss sat back down and considered her options. She could stay and Peeta along with the others would be put to death, or probably not rescued at all, simply left in the hands of the Capitol to be tortured to death. She'd be taking her life, her baby's, Regina and Justus' baby's life into her own hands, and what if Coin decided to exact her revenge on Prim or her mother? If she went into battle she'd have Cinna's body armor to protect her and it would only be her and the baby's lives at risk. Either way her child could be killed. How many people died alongside of her was another story. "I'll go," Katniss focused on nothing as she stared straight ahead. "I'm of no help to the rebellion here."

"There we go, sweetheart!" Haymitch's plan began to form as he spoke with Coin and Boggs about keeping her safe.

"What the hell was that about?" Gale said softly to her. "Never seen you back down from a fight before."

"I...I don't..." Katniss turned to face the room. "I don't want anyone saying I lost the baby." Thoughts of Peeta hearing the lie turned her insides to jelly. "Peeta will hear about the baby from me."

"Do you have any idea what kind of message we'd be sending to the rebels if I allowed a pregnant woman to go into battle?" Coin's normally stone face turned harsh. "No. We'll spread the word..."

"You will not!" Katniss yelled. "I can't have him learning about..." she could barely get the words out, "...about losing the baby from someone like Snow." She couldn't allow Peeta to hear the terrible lie she was living. "No," Katniss lowered her voice down. "You want me out there, then I go under my rules."

"Sweetheart, think about what you're saying," Haymitch tried to reason with her. "Coin would look no better than Snow if she let you out of here in that condition. We're trying to let people know we're better than the Capitol, not as brutal."

Katniss heard Haymitch go on and on about how they were only thinking of the rebellion's image. How horrible it would look if the rebels put Katniss in the field while pregnant. Plutarch joined in...Beetee weighed in with his two cents, and the entire time Katniss just kept repeating, "no," over and over again.

When Gale leaned over and said, "Peeta will understand, Katniss. He'll be fine. Look at how well you're handling it. Like nothing happened at all." Katniss' eyes almost popped out of her head.

"The decision has already been made," Coin said. "We don't make it a habit of lying to the people of the districts, and we will not start now because of some childish notion that..."

"You don't lie?" Katniss felt her entire being start to shake as she cut Coin off. "That's all you people do is lie!" She threw a fiery glare in Coin's directions. "Why don't you tell them the truth now?! Tell them about the order you gave to my doctor!"

Coin's eye twitched. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" Katniss began to walk in Coin's direction. "Don't you remember telling my doctor you couldn't send a pregnant woman into battle and that she should abort my baby...tell me I had a miscarriage? Because I remember. I remember it all too well."

The entire room fell silent until Coin said, "The only thing I recall is you having a mental breakdown and throwing around accusations after the loss of your child."

Katniss shook her head slowly from side to side. "That's what you'd like these people to believe, but don't go spouting your lies to me. I heard you...heard you tell Dr. Valero to abort my baby and when she refused you said you'd get another physician to do it. In your words; I'm young. I can have another child, after all, you're fond of children here in Thirteen."

There was a stand off between Coin and Katniss. The tension in the room was so thick you could barely walk through it without feeling mucked down. "Obviously you telling your husband about the loss of your child means a great deal to you, so I'll agree to keep it quiet...for now," Coin spoke with hatred in her voice.

"Come on, sweetheart," Katniss could feel Haymitch's hands guiding her back to her chair. "Let's sit down. You've been through a lot. We know you didn't mean what you said here today. Just letting your emotions get the best of you." The pressure of Haymitch's hands on her shoulders told her she had said more than enough. "No one will say a thing about the baby. If people ask, you tell them what you want." Haymitch looked to Coin, "Fair? It was her kid after all."

"I already said I would agree." Coin snapped. "Where are we sending her?"

Talks resumed about Katniss' destination, and Katniss' mind was racing out of control. 'What did you do? Why would you put yourself, your baby...' She saw Justus standing in a corner of the room, '...Justus and Regina's child, in danger? Stupid, Katniss. That was stupid.' She had to figure out a way to make it right. "President Coin," Katniss spoke in an even tone. "It was wrong for me to say those things out loud." Katniss refused to apologize for what she had said, but she was telling the truth. It was wrong...dangerous for her to speak her mind. "I was having a lot of problems when I first got here...determining what was a dream...nightmare, and what was actually real."

There was a hint of relief in Coin's eyes when she said, "Apology accepted."

Katniss wanted to scream, 'I didn't apologize. I was covering my ass.' Instead she gave the woman a curt nod and waited until the rebels came up with a plan of action for her. The people called into the meeting were dismissed, Coin left, Beetee was wheeled out by Finnick, and the only ones left were Gale, Haymitch and Katniss. She could see the look on her mentor's face that said she had gone too far today, knew Haymitch would want to talk to her alone. "Gale, go ahead and go without me. I'll meet you there."

She sat across from Haymitch and waited for the lecture to begin. "Having a rougher time than you thought without Peeta?" He asked her. Katniss just shrugged. "Katniss, you're lucky she thought you were apologizing to her or you might be the one on trial for treason."

Katniss' eyes lit up a little at Haymitch's comment. Her mentor knew she wasn't saying she was sorry. "Yeah...well...better me than Peeta. Or Effie for that matter."

"Always willing to sacrifice yourself for your fellow man. That's why you're in this position, sweetheart. Because you always have to step up."

"But I didn't today. If I had..." Katniss rested her head in her hand.

"If you had, what?" Haymitch asked.

Did she tell him? How many more people could she let in before everyone found out. At this point she wasn't even sure if she could trust Haymitch. "Why didn't you tell me and Peeta about Thirteen? About the tunnel that could've led to our freedom?"

Haymitch slugged down in his chair. "I should've. In the beginning I looked at you two as weapons against the Capitol."

"Sort of like these people look at us now."

"Yeah, but then... Ya gotta understand sweetheart, I didn't expect to actually care about you and Peeta, so when I did, it came as a bit of a shock to my drunk ass. Kept telling myself to put the rebellion first. That's what was important, but then Effie..." Haymitch ran his hand down his face, "...that woman just can't keep her mouth shut. Always making me...*think*! I hate it." Haymitch turned towards Katniss. "She told me to watch out for you. Said everyone's using you two like objects, not looking at you as people. That's what she wanted me to do out here...take care of you the way she would, and the only way I know how to do that is by putting an end to this war so we can all go on living the way we want, not the way the Capitol wants us to."

"If Effie were here, do you think she'd let me go out into a combat zone?"

"Only if you were protected beyond belief."

"Would she let me go out if I were still pregnant?"

"Hell, I wouldn't let you go out if you were still pregnant. Would never risk my grandkid like that," Haymitch gave her a lopsided grin. "I understand you not wanting Peeta to find out about the baby that way, but he's gonna find out Katniss, and it's still gonna hurt him no matter who says it."

She had to tell him. Had to. "If I were still pregnant and I went to the districts, what would you do to keep me safe?"

"Doesn't matter sweetheart," Haymitch ran a hand over hers then placed it on his lap. "The baby's gone."

"Right," Katniss whispered. "Gone."

"You can have another one you know. When this war is over, hell, you and Peeta can fill your house up with 'em if you want, but nothing you say can bring the baby back, Katniss." Haymitch's voice cracked.

"Wish you could, but..." he paused and said with regret in his tone, "Peeta's gonna find out whether you want him to or not. You're gonna tell him...it'll get out that you lost it...something, but you can't keep it from him."

"Haymitch," Katniss stared straight ahead, "Did you know we wanted to name it after Maysilee if it was a girl?"

Haymitch sucked in a breath. "No. Didn't know that."

Katniss nodded and said, "Clayton, after my dad if it was a boy, and Maysilee if it was a girl. Peeta and I were going to talk to you about it first, but he didn't think you'd mind."

"I would've liked that."

Katniss looked around the room and said, "You know what I really hated about the Tribute Center? Even though there were no signs, I still knew they were listening to every word I said."

Haymitch stood up and headed for the door. "Yeah, I always hated that too. Good thing they don't do that sort of thing here in Thirteen." He held the door open for her. "Ready to go sweetheart?"

"Yup," she followed him into the deserted hallway then led him to one of her favorite hiding spots. "I'm assuming they don't keep old storage closets wired for sound."

"Nah, just the places that require extra security." Haymitch leaned against the wall between an old piece of machinery that looked like it swept floors. "They don't have resources to waste out here so they're not going to spy on anything that ain't worth spying on."

Katniss turned to see Haymitch's eyes filled with pain, took his hand in hers and whispered, "I was telling the truth earlier...about the baby. It wasn't an emotional outburst. Coin wanted it dead so I could be the Mockingjay, and now that I am...I have to do whatever I can to keep..." her hand went to her stomach. "I've got to protect myself." Haymitch's eyes followed her hand. "I need to be protected out there today."

"Think I'd let something happen to you?" He stared at her in wonder. "I know I screwed up not filling you and Peeta in on everything, but I'm gonna make that up to you. No more secrets sweetheart. I find out something, I'll let you in on it whether they want me to tell you or not."

"You swear?" Katniss studied her mentor. "Promise me that you won't keep anything from me anymore?"

"On my life," he shook his head. "No. On Effie's life. I swear you can trust me."

Katniss gave her head a nod. "I can trust you?"

"That's right."

"Then why didn't you let anyone know I was the one that broke Effie's code?"

Haymitch took a second then said, "First thing Coin said when I told her about the message was 'don't tell Katniss.' She didn't want to get you all worked up."

"Yeah, sure she didn't." Katniss sneered. "Is there anything I don't know...about Thirteen?"

"Honestly I don't know a lot about this place myself. It's not like Coin and I were pen pals or anything." Haymitch carefully scrutinized her. "My turn to ask a question."

"Go ahead."

"What was up with that outburst in there today? Making those accusations towards Coin... Not good sweetheart. Not good," Haymitch hung his head a bit and shook it from side to side.

"I told you already, they weren't accusations." Katniss leaned back against the wall, mirroring Haymitch's image.

"Sweetheart, do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes. I'm very well aware of what I'm saying. That woman ordered Dr. Valero to abort our child. She stood in the dining hall and let everyone assume the worst of Peeta...Effie, and then led everyone to believe that I could care less about treasonous acts. Come on, Haymitch. Do you really trust this woman?" If Katniss was going to get Haymitch on

her side, she'd have to use the best weapon she had in her arsenal. "I know for a fact that Effie doesn't trust her worth a damn."

Haymitch's eyes flew towards Katniss'. "What makes you say that?"

"You...Regina..." Katniss' tone took on one of knowledge. "Effie thought Coin would do anything to use me and Peeta in this war, and she was right. Problem is, no one knew to what extent. Well, now I do."

Haymitch's expression changed to thoughtful. "Effie warned me before getting onto the hovercraft...told me Coin wanted to prove she was just as powerful as Snow. Make a statement. That that was why she insisted on rescuing you from the arena instead of letting you use that escape route in Twelve."

"Our new president has some twisted ideas about doing the right thing." Katniss finally confessed to Haymitch exactly what happened the morning Regina was ordered to terminate the pregnancy. "Regina said she'd do it, but..."

"No. I can't believe Regina..."

"Shut up, Haymitch." Katniss stepped closer to him speaking gently to him, "Like I said...if it's a girl, we want to name her Maysilee. If it's a boy his name will be Clayton, after my father."

"You...uh..." He gave her a strange look and picked up her wrist that used to hold the bracelet that said, mentally disoriented. "You think maybe you should stop in and see the doctor again sweetheart?"

Katniss let out a soft laugh. "No. I'm perfectly healthy."

"Maybe that anemia thing is causing more problems than they're aware of?"

"My...*anemia* should be cured in about," She stopped and counted, "Oh, I'd say about six to seven months."

"Sweet mother," Haymitch took on an expression of disbelief. "I saw the scan, Katniss. We all did. There was no baby in there."

"Regina disguised her husband as an Avox for...how many years, Haymitch? Think she couldn't figure out how to hide this?" Katniss rubbed her stomach. "I'm trusting you, Haymitch. I'm trusting the life of mine and Peeta's child to you. If Coin finds out, she'll get one of those other doctors to..." Katniss grew angry. "You have no clue how badly I wanted to give everyone at that meeting today all the disgusting details! Show them who she really is!"

"Wouldn't have mattered Katniss. A lot of these people think the same way she does. They're looking at the bigger picture, and right now they're looking at you like you're their last hope." Haymitch's hand ran back and forth across his chin. "Are you sure about this? I mean...you were having a lot of problems keeping things straight in the head for awhile there. These people have been living with Coin their whole lives. To them she's someone they can trust. You...you're the girl that walks around moving her lips talking to her missing husband."

"Haymitch, I can't stop puking and their DNA scanner detected it yesterday."

Haymitch's whole face lit up. "Holy shit! This...this is a good thing, right? I mean...you want it don't you?"

"Yes," Katniss grinned at him. "This is a very good thing, and I want it more than anything." Saying it out loud was kind of strange

considering she spent her life swearing she'd never have kids. "Now, all we have to do is keep me safe. Can you do that? Keep me safe out there?"

"Yeah," Haymitch worried. "Effie would kill me if she knew I was letting you go out in your condition."

"Effie would kill you if you didn't do everything in your power to save this child's life," Katniss corrected him. "Now, I have to go put on that Mockingjay uniform and face...Where am I going?"

"District Eight. They had some heavy bombing this morning, but the raids are over now. It's the safest place we can think to send you."

"Haymitch," Katniss held the doorknob in her hand. "Wipe that stupid look off of your face."

"What stupid look?"

"The one that's practically screaming, 'I'm gonna be a grandpa!'" Katniss chuckled.

"Yeah, sorry about that, but..." Haymitch smiled. "This is the first good news I've heard in a long time. I'll make sure no one questions your...condition. Maybe I'll put the word out about that anemia thing. What the hell made you think of some antiquated blood disease?"

"Prim," Katniss grinned. "Turns out, my sister is a genius."

"I'd say. Imagine what'll happen when we get her and Effie together."

"We'll win this war in no time," Katniss walked into the hallway followed by Haymitch. "Keep us safe," she said quietly before turning for Special Weaponry.

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Peeta's eyelids continued to droop, his head continued to fall forward then snap back up. He couldn't let himself fall asleep. Snow had him strapped to a chair with electrodes on his chest. "We're able to determine his heart rate now Mr. President. That last little snooze was all we needed to get a fix on his current beats per minute." A physician spoke to Snow.

"We're going to try something new and exciting tonight Peeta." Snow turned to him. "Did you know when people fall asleep their pulse...breathing...heartbeat all tend to slow down? Your breathing becomes deeper as you relax. The heart no longer has to work as hard trying to pump blood uphill, so to speak, and it takes a little rest. The opposite occurs when you're...excited...hard at work... However, everyone has a normal heart rate, and now yours has been determined which is where this little device comes into play," Snow rested a palm on a machine to his right. "If your heart speeds up, you will receive an electrical jolt. If it slows down, you will receive an electrical jolt. In other words Peeta, your life is in your hands. Stay calm and you'll be fine."

"You decided to take me up on my advice I see," Peeta glared at Snow.

"What advice would that be?"

"To kill me now before I got to you," Peeta could feel a little zing flowing through his skin.

"Excellent," Snow lit up. "You're doing quite well. A little excitement...a little jolt. Understand?"

"Do what you want. I don't care anymore." Peeta turned away from Snow and saw Katniss' face light up a television screen. He sucked in a deep breath and felt a huge bolt of electricity go through his system. "Aaaaah!" He screamed out at the top of his lungs.

"Seeing her is painful, is it not?" Snow's evil leer hung over Peeta's panting body. "You've got twenty seconds to try and return your heart rate back to normal before the device works again. I shall warn you Peeta, no one can stand too many jolts to the heart without dying."

He took several cleansing breaths before Snow began to play a scene between Katniss and Gale walking through Twelve's Town Square which were quickly replaced with pictures of burnt buildings, smoke...dead bodies. "She didn't do that. Katniss had nothing to do with it." A slight zing started again and Peeta slowly released a breath between his lips trying to focus on the story he told Johanna and Annie about that special day beneath the oak tree. Peeta's eyes glazed over as he imagined Katniss meeting him day after day. Smiling at him. Holding his hand. The way they would slowly move closer and closer to each other until their knees would touch during their lunch period. His eyes drifted downward to the device that shot the tubes into his veins, his heart began to race and another jolt shot through him. "Nooooooo!" This time when the drugs hit his system, Peeta's body reacted in a way he could have never predicted. For some odd reason he almost craved the putrid poison they were pumping into him.

"Enjoy the viewing, Peeta. If you'll excuse me. I haven't slept much and I am quite tired," Snow walked towards a door. "Doctor, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," the physician Peeta had come to know as his torturer continued pumping the glowing green substance into his veins. "This will help you to see...clearly."

There was nothing clear about the shimmering scenes that continually played before him or the way he was starting to enjoy the way his limbs felt at the first rush of the venom, the way his head got slightly fuzzy. His brain was saying, 'Fight this,' but his body was reacting on its own. 'Whatever this stuff is, they're getting you hooked on it,' he warned himself before refocusing his attention on the quickly changing photographs flashing before his eyes. Pictures of his father, his brothers, and a woman Peeta thought looked familiar, but couldn't put a name to, were being shown to him. Then burnt bodies, charred beyond recognition lying in front of what used to be a bakery in District Twelve. Peeta's pulse began to slowly increase. Electricity bolted through his body causing him to convulse and jerk. "St...stoh...stohp." He took a few more shallow breaths, closed his eyes and was woken up by another burst through his system. "You want me to believe Katniss did this, but I won't. I'd rather die." It was time to put an end to this. To show Snow he was willing to take his life into his own hands. Peeta let his thoughts travel to killing Snow. Dreaming about tearing him limb from limb with his bare hands. He could feel little bursts of electricity running through him, but there was someone he hated more. Gale. A picture of Gale and Katniss flashed onto the screen and Peeta remembered the scene of them kissing in the woods of Twelve. He concentrated on the way Katniss had deceived him, led him to believe that they were in love all the while her heart belonged to Gale. His heart began to race at an uncontrollable rate as did his mind when he pictured Gale...his friend...acting out on his urges with Katniss.

"Aaaaah!" Peeta screamed out with the bolt of electricity shooting through him. There was no attempt to control his breathing, his pulse or his heart. As far as he was concerned, it was broken...smashed into a million pieces. He no longer wanted this woman in his life. The one that could cause so much pain he preferred death over a chance at life. "I hate you! I HATE YOU!" He closed his eyes and began breathing in and out at a ridiculously rapid rate. Dwelling on the pain Katniss brought into his life and said goodbye to it all.

"What are you doing?" The doctor began adjusting the machine hooked up to Peeta. "What are you...STOP IT!" Peeta's heart kept beating faster and faster. "President Snow," the doctor pressed a button on a remote control. "Sir, he's trying to kill himself."

"What do you mean, kill himself?!"

"He's...Oh my," the sound of a steady beep blared through the speaker system. "He's dead. Peeta is dead."

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Waiting for her in Beetee's new home was Boggs. "Did you need something?" Katniss still wondered about this man. He was one of the people from District Thirteen that didn't flinch when Coin threatened to bring all the Capitol rebels up on charges.

"I'm here to escort you to Airborne Division."

Katniss looked down at her uniform Cinna designed, 'my suit of armor,' she thought of the story Peeta had told a group of kids from the Seam about a knight wearing shining armor. Beetee placed a helmet of interwoven material on her head. A snug fitting hood of sort that felt like soft material was pulled over that. Both could withstand not only bullets from traditional guns, but the Peacekeeper's magnetic weapons as well. She was dressed in thin woven metals that bent and formed to her skin over the same soft material that covered her hood. Special plates that covered her entire torso protecting her womb.

"We created this before you lost..." Beetee cleared his throat. "It was designed for you before we knew your current medical situation, so your abdomen has an extra layer of protection over it. I suppose we could remove it once you get back..."

"No," Katniss said without concern in her voice. "It's best to leave it in place. Wouldn't want to cause any internal bleeding after all I've been through."

"Yes," Beetee turned to grab a vest, "Excellent point. Here," he slid the tight yet fashionably designed vest over her arms. "This will protect your vital organs." he lifted a white wire off of her shoulder and handed her an earpiece. "This will allow you to speak with your handler. In this case, Haymitch and this," he secured a mask onto her belt. "This will protect you from any chemical attacks. Gas and such. If you see anyone dropping without reason, put it on immediately."

"Seems Cinna thought of everything," Katniss said as she looked at the different weapons strapped onto her uniform. "This is much more complicated than the uniform you put on me yesterday."

"That was designed for the propos filmed here, not for battle." Beetee strapped a quivver divided into three cylinders of arrows onto her back. "These are designed to work with the bow I created for you," he

handed her the bow. "Right side," he pointed to the cylinder on her right, "Fire. Left side, explosive and Center, regular. You shouldn't need them, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

Katniss held the bow in her hand and said, "Good morning." The vibrations of her weapon 'waking up' still shook her to the core. "It really is alive isn't it?" She looked at Beetee with excitement in her eyes.

"As close to alive as can be," he said proudly.

She really shouldn't have felt a thrilling rush at the thought of using the weapons against Snow's army in battle, but she did. It was like the vibrations of the bow were sending a burst of excitement through her entire system. Thoughts of being extra careful were slowly beginning to vanish. She felt alive...like her old self again, and it was an almost welcome relief to put her hatred for Snow in the forefront of her mind, and stop worrying.

"Ready to go?" Boggs stood to the side.

"Let's do this."

"Katniss! Katniss!" Finnick started running in her direction just as the elevator doors were about to close on her and Boggs. "They won't let me go!"

Katniss bit her lip, trying her best to hide the smile at Finnick's appearance. His bare legs sticking out of his hospital gown, slippers on his feet, a rope with worn, twisted knots dangling from his fingertips, and a wild look in his eyes that matched his hair. She hadn't noticed how distraught he looked during the meeting that morning, but now, amongst the pristine computer room and Boggs, a well groomed soldier, Katniss had to fight the urge to laugh at the once stunning

victor that stood before her. "Oh," she tapped at her head, "I forgot. I was supposed to tell you to report to Beetee. Something about a new trident for you."

"Really?" Finnick's eyes grew bright, and for the first time in a long time Katniss felt like she was looking at her ally again. "What's it do?"

"I don't know, but if it's anything like my bow and arrows, you're going to love it." She took a second trying to figure out how to keep Finnick in Thirteen without complaints. "You'll have to train with it for awhile though."

"Right. Of course I will." Finnick turned in a rush flashing Katniss and Boggs a glimpse of his underwear. "Guess I better get down there."

"Finnick?" Katniss took her bottom lip between her teeth. "Maybe some pants would be good?"

He glanced down at his bare legs, ripped his hospital gown off and struck a pose. "Why? Do you find this...distracting?"

Katniss let out a roar of laughter, not only at Finnick's signs of life, but at Boggs who looked completely flabbergasted at Finnick's half naked pose. "I'm only human, Odair. Don't tell Peeta I said that when he gets back," Katniss winked. "Wouldn't want him to get jealous." She continued to chuckle as the elevator doors closed on her and Boggs. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be. You handled that very well." Katniss was amazed at how proper Boggs' posture was as he spoke. He'd make Effie Trinket proud. "Better than my having to arrest the man."

"Yeah, suppose so." She took a good long look at him from the corner of her eyes trying to decipher him. On one hand he was practically

glued to Coin's side, on the other that was the second time today he had said something somewhat friendly to her. Katniss' hand reached out and grabbed onto the railing attached to the wall when a loud series of clicks shot through the elevator car and they began moving to the left. "This thing moves sideways?"

"Yes. There's a whole network of elevator paths under Thirteen. This one lies just above the transport spoke to the fifth airlift platform. It's taking us to the Hangar."

Katniss began thinking of all the areas in Thirteen's hidden fortress. The Hangar, Special Weaponry, Meadowlark Room, Medical Bay, the section of housing that was blocked off, a place where food...crops were grown... "Thirteen is a lot larger than I thought."

"Can't take credit for it. We basically inherited the place. Since the..." he paused before continuing. "It's all we can do to keep it running these days."

"Since the..." Katniss faced him, "...what?"

Boggs answered without looking at Katniss. "We've had a hard time keeping things going on our own."

The elevator doors opened to reveal a hangar full of different hovercrafts, most looked fairly dated, but three of them were sparkling and appeared to be brand new. "Inherit these too?"

"Some of them were manufactured here. Some were part of the Capitol's air force, and then we have those that were acquired during your escape thanks to the resourcefulness of the rebels in the Capitol."

"You mean, thanks to Effie Trinket," Katniss stepped out and walked along a path. Her hatred for District Thirteen...for Coin was growing with each step. "You had all of this, and yet you left the rest of the districts defenseless against the Capitol?"

"Until recently we were in no shape to launch any form of counterattack. We could barely stay alive. After we'd overthrown and executed the Capitol's people, only a handful of us even knew how to pilot them. We could've nuked them but if we did that, then there was always the chance that they'd respond in kind. If we engage in that type of war with the Capitol, would there be any human life left?"

Katniss stopped walking and turned to him, "You sound an awful lot like my husband, and he was called a traitor."

"He called for a ceasefire," Boggs said in his defense.

"Oh, well," Katniss rolled her eyes, "That makes all the difference in the world."

"Neither side is launching nuclear missiles." Boggs said avoiding Katniss' statement.

"Guess both sides think like my husband," She glared. "Too bad they're not as brave as Peeta and willing to speak their minds."

"This way soldier Mellark," Boggs led her to a smaller hovercraft.

Katniss mounted the steps to the small hovercraft and noticed the group of people District Thirteen's rebels decided to send with her to make sure she was safe. Plutarch, his assistant Fulvia by his side as usual, Gale and Haymitch who looked exceptionally uncomfortable wearing Thirteen's dark gray military jumpsuit, plus a few other people Katniss had seen, but never officially met. Her film crew.

"Ugh," Fulvia held Katniss' face in her hand by her chin turning it from side to side. "All that work down the drain. I'm not blaming you," she turned her back to Katniss. "Most people aren't born with camera ready faces like him," she took Gale by the chin. "Now this is handsome. Isn't he handsome?" She turned to Katniss who gave Fulvia a strange look.

"Don't expect us to be too impressed. We just saw Finnick Odair in his underwear." Boggs said as he strapped himself into a seat. An image of him flashed through Katniss head, holding a child, smiling in the dining hall. With the exception of elbowing Gale in the nose and being a fan of Coin's, Boggs was actually a likeable guy. Taking all of that into consideration, and the fact that she'd been wanting to elbow Gale in the nose herself lately, Katniss decided she was going to like Boggs.

She looked around the strange group of people surrounding her, wondering how they were going to win a war... 'A war you have no clue about,' she thought to herself. "Um...so...what is the state of the war right now?" Katniss asked no one in particular hoping that someone would answer.

Plutarch took a few minutes to explain to Katniss about all of the districts that were fighting against the Capitol with the exception of District Two which was where the Capitol's defense was based out of after the Dark Days. It was a little surprising to hear that people, who weren't exempt from the Games, gladly took on the role of protecting the Capitol, for Katniss. "They supply weaponry as well as train and provide Peacekeepers." Everyone always assumed the guards came from the Capitol, but Plutarch explained the way the system worked. "You're supposed to believe they hail from the Capitol, but the fact is, many people have debts they cannot pay. In lieu of going to jail, working in quarries...a life of poverty, the residents of Two have the

choice to become Peacekeepers to wipe their slate clean. The Capitol excused all debts owed for a mere twenty year commitment of their life."

"Twenty years?!" Gale asked from his spot next to Katniss. "Why would they do that? I mean...I can understand not wanting to be in debt, but..."

"You've seen how eager their children are to volunteer for the Games. They're bred...trained their whole lives for battle."

"They want to kill," an image of Cato snapping the boy from District Three's neck popped into Katniss' head.

"Unfortunately, that's an accurate assessment." Plutarch's explanation continued. "Not all of them are like that, but most are. Some do it because they actually believe in the oath they're swearing to uphold, but most do it for the money."

"Probably why the ones in Twelve were fine with trading with us," Gale said to Katniss. "Signed up to have their debts wiped out and wound up in the poorest district in the nation."

"What happens after...I mean, we're fighting in each district...then what?" Katniss asked.

"We plan on taking over each district, Two will be the last since they have such loyalty to the Capitol, then all of the districts will fight together as we invade the Capitol," Plutarch answered.

"No...after that." Katniss was trying to imagine their world with no President, or worse, with Coin as the head of their nation. "Who runs the government?"

"We all do," Plutarch took on an excited expression. "The districts will form a republic where the people of our nation, including the Capitol, elect their own representative so their voices will be heard."

"So no president?" Katniss asked cautiously.

"No, we'll still have a president, but that president will not be surrounded by his own people." Katniss didn't believe Plutarch's description of their new government for one minute, which he must have recognized by his next statement. "Each district will have their own voice...and it will be the president's job to listen to them...work with them. Don't look suspicious, Katniss. It worked in the past."

"In books," Haymitch gave Katniss a wary look.

"Yes, in history books." Plutarch said.

"Great," Katniss rolled her eyes. "We all know how accurate they are."

Plutarch chuckled a bit. "Not the ones provided by the government for your education. The ones that survived the Dark Days. Our nation's real history."

Katniss leaned forward. "There are books about that...that survived the Dark Days?"

"Oh yes," Plutarch answered. "Many."

"Why wouldn't the Capitol destroy them? I mean...wouldn't that just give people like us...ideas?" Gale asked Plutarch.

"Which is why they are in storage...hiding with many relics from our nation."

"What else do you have in hiding? And...and where are these things?" Katniss wondered.

"District Thirteen has many of them in their underground facility," Plutarch looked down at his computer, punched a few buttons then flipped it around to show Katniss. "This might be something Peeta would be interested in when he returns. There's a forgery located in the art museum in the Capitol, but the real works of art are in Thirteen."

Katniss reached out to touch the computer's screen. "That's it. Starry Night," Katniss' eyes flew to Plutarch's. "It's in Thirteen?"

"Yes," he answered. "We have music, art, history books, even something called a bible. Apparently our ancestors were very religious."

"Why?" Gale's face twisted.

"They believed in a higher power of sorts," Plutarch sat back and pushed a few buttons on his computer screen turning the page to black. "God, Buddha...a few others, but yes, they were quite fond of religion."

Katniss had heard of it, everyone did, but no one she knew ever believed in anything of the sort. "Angels," Katniss whispered to herself.

"What Catnip?"

"Angels." She looked down at her feet and remembered the morning Peeta had first showed her the tunnel out of Twelve. "Peeta believed in them. Well, I don't really know if he believed in them, but he... he called me one," she smiled softly to herself. The thought of seeing

Peeta's favorite work of art and reading about angels struck a curious note. "I'd be very interested in seeing this area some time Plutarch."

"Oh, I'm afraid it's off limits. Must protect our history you see."

Katniss didn't worry about it. She'd find it on one of her explorations. "Sure." There was silence in the hovercraft for several seconds before a thought came to Katniss. "What happens if we lose the war?"

"If we lose?" Plutarch's face looked towards the sky floating by, an ironic smile on his face. "I would expect next year's Hunger Games to be quite unforgettable. Oh, that reminds me. Here," he removed a small vile from his vest and shook a couple of dark violet pills into the palm of his hand. "They're called nightlock. You must swallow it whole for it to work. Once it disintegrates it will do no more harm than a blueberry."

Haymitch's head snapped around. Katniss' eyes flew open. "You...you want me to kill myself?" she asked.

"The rebels can't afford for any of us to be captured," Plutarch tapped to a tiny pocket on Katniss' shoulder where the pill slipped in. "We named it after the berries in honor of you and Peeta," Plutarch said as though Katniss should be flattered.

"Gee. Thanks," she took the pill and slid it into the tiny pocket located on the front shoulder of her left sleeve. She stared into space, trying to figure out what she would do if she was captured. Injury even death had crossed her mind, but never being taken hostage, and definitely not suicide. Could she swallow the pill for the sake of the rebellion? She stuck her finger into the tiny pocket where the pill was hidden and something pressed down against it. The pill Plutarch had given her was now crushed into dust. Her mind instantly went to Cinna. 'It seems you *did* think of everything, including making my decision for

me.' Katniss swallowed the pain of her friend's death. She knew, without a shadow of doubt, that Cinna was one of the rare people in the rebellion, like Effie and now Haymitch, that put her above their cause. For the first time since agreeing to become the Mockingjay Katniss felt like a human being and not just another piece in another person's Game.

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The hovercraft left them on the outskirts of District Eight. Gale along with several others surrounded Katniss leading her to a hospital where bodies of injured people were being treated by medical personnel flown in from Thirteen. "I can't do this," Katniss said quietly. "I was expecting burnt out buildings...wreckage, not wounded. How am I supposed to help these people?"

Gale was trying to think of something to say to her, but it was Boggs that stepped up and put a hand on her shoulder. "Your being here will help them more than any doctor ever could." He led them towards a woman, obviously in charge, with dark hair and eyes to match. A bloody bandage at her throat, the weight of her weapon causing the strap to pull at it. "This is Commander Paylor of Eight," Boggs turned to Katniss. "Commander, Soldier Katniss Mellark."

"Yeah," Paylor gave Katniss a once over. "I know who she is. Glad you're alive. We weren't sure."

"I'm still not sure myself," Katniss looked nervously around.

"She's been in recovery," Gale could've sworn he heard a hint of dissent in the woman's voice. "Bad concussion...miscarriage, but she insisted on coming here to see the wounded."

"Gale!" Katniss snapped at him.

"What?" He didn't know what he said to make her so angry. He was only trying to stand up for her.

"Sorry to hear about the loss of your baby," Paylor said in passing, "but we've got plenty of wounded if you're interested in meeting them."

"I..." Katniss stuttered, "I...didn't..." she let out a soft burst of air. "Where to?"

"You think this is a good idea?" Gale spoke to Paylor. "Assembling your wounded like this?"

"I think it's slightly better than leaving them to die," She said harshly.

"That's not what I meant," Gale said defensively.

"That's my current option, but you think of a third and get Coin to approve it, I'll be all for it." She turned to Katniss. "Come on Mockingjay. This way. Feel free to bring your friends." Gale felt out of place surrounded by the camera crew filming every move Katniss made. "There's a mass grave started a few blocks west of here, but we don't have the manpower to move the deceased yet." Paylor led them to a makeshift building filled with their wounded.

Katniss' hand flew to her nose before they entered the facility. The stench hit Gale the moment he stepped into their hospital. "Don't leave my side," she whispered to him and dropped her hand from her face.

He glanced down at her and took her wrist in his hand, felt her tug a little then whispered, "Just this once, I'll let you pretend I'm Peeta." It took about three seconds before she threaded her fingers through his, and Gale instantly regretted saying those words to her, because it wasn't his hand she was holding, and he knew it. She gave it one big squeeze then let go.

"Katniss?" Gale heard someone speak her name which quickly spread throughout the facility.

Children as well as adults came up to her in awe. "You must be so worried about Peeta. We know he only spoke that way to protect you..." Their words of encouragement towards Peeta seemed to provide a sense of relief to Katniss. Gale watched her closely as people touched her like she was some form of miracle worker. They spoke to her, asked her about Peeta and the baby, but Katniss kept turning the questions around, never answering them directly, always focusing on the patients. That's when he realized he had done exactly what she had insisted they didn't do. He spilled the beans about her kid. He didn't know why it bothered him so much, but her lack of acceptance was wearing on him. She had to face up to it and move on. There were more important things to worry about like the people they were surrounded by, and truth be told, he was glad she didn't have to worry about raising a kid anymore. She never wanted it, and it would've been nothing but trouble if she kept puking like she did while she was in the arena. This country needed their Mockingjay to be strong. He looked over his shoulder and took in the casualties of war, lined up side by side. The sound of Katniss and Peeta's names being chanted as she stood on a table waving farewell to them. The cameras recording her as she fulfilled her position as their figurehead, and it brought a fresh wave of emotion towards her. His Catnip no longer existed. She was gone and in her place stood a woman of great power. Power over the people of the districts, and Gale had to

wonder, 'If this is how they're reacting with just you here, what's it going to be like when Peeta's by your side?' The one thing he knew for certain was that she wouldn't have dropped Peeta's hand as soon as she walked into the hospital.

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"Sir, I understand the danger involved, but imagine the outcome if I succeed," Effie stood at the window of the hospital room Peeta was sleeping in. "He attempted to kill himself due to the images you were showing him today. Maybe if he saw the real thing with his own eyes..." Effie let the suggestion hang in the air.

President Snow narrowly glared through the window at Peeta, "That boy is causing us more problems than he's worth. I should have let him die today instead of ordering that idiotic doctor to revive him." After a few moments of silence he began speaking again. "We'll need to make sure District Twelve is secure before your arrival. I'll want an army of soldiers to accompany you while you're there. Show him that bakery...the dead bodies," Snow faced Effie, "and do not let him out of your sight."

Effie's heart began to race at the prospect of getting Peeta out of the Capitol, but the army of soldiers would be a problem. "I'm sure once he sees the devastation she caused to his home, he'll feel as much hatred towards Katniss as we all do. A quiet walk through his old

home...nothing to distract him...no thoughts of the Capitol attempting to put images in his head... Yes, sir. I believe this is a perfect way to get him on our side."

"A quiet walk," Snow said softly. "Miss. Trinket, there are a few things I'll need from you while in Twelve. First, do not let Peeta know his mother is dead. If he asks, you are to tell him you have been filling that role since he left Twelve and took up residency at the Capitol. Second, I want you to take him to that blasted tree he's so fond of and place a recording device on it. If Katniss returns to Twelve chances are she'll have fond memories of that area and pay it a visit. I want to know if she shows up there so we can send in our troops immediately."

"Yes, sir." Effie would have to figure something out about that too. Perhaps let the rebels know it's there so they can get rid of it. "How many soldiers will be accompanying us into Twelve sir?"

"One," Snow answered. "Your private guard has been doing a remarkable job. If you only knew how close to death you came last night, Miss. Trinket, you'd be thanking your lucky stars for that man."

"Whatever do you mean?" Effie's fingers went to her throat.

Snow took one last look at a sleeping Peeta, "There was a murder...two actually, in that bar the rebels used to send communications."

"My word!" Effie gasped. "Is that why they wouldn't allow me inside?"

"Yes, I heard you arrived within minutes of the bodies being discovered." Snow led her down the hallway towards the elevators. "Fortunately we haven't lost all of our spies. Your Peacekeeper has done a wonderful job keeping you from harm. I should move him to my

own force, however, your life is now of the utmost importance to our cause."

"It is?"

"Unfortunately our agent orange blossom was killed by a rebel last night. We can only assume they struggled with one another. She was found burned to a crisp and he was found with a gun and a knife wound." Snow sniffed. "My agents are currently investigating Mr. Darlington's establishments as we speak."

"Darlington? Carter Darlington? The sponsor?" Effie feared that Snow's men would discover the hidden room, the medical supplies, worst of all the music box she had left for Katniss and Peeta in case they ever made it back to the Capitol. The tiny music chip she left inside would be the end of her.

"It seems Mr. Darlington was working with the rebels for quite some time. Unfortunately when we sent our agent in to infiltrate the rebellion Mr. Darlington's emotions got the best of him. He refused to allow her to get too involved with the group in case she was ever captured." Snow smiled a bit, "But now we have you, and you're going to be a much bigger help than she ever was."

Terror began to fill every ounce of Effie's being. "By helping Peeta to think he's now a Capitol resident. That I have adopted him as my own...by turning him against Katniss."

"The boy should have nothing but hatred for his own mother. Why not provide him with one that cares? Perhaps then these treatments we've been giving him will work."

"We can only hope, sir." Effie stayed in the elevator as the president stepped out and Mr. Tanner entered. "I shall wait by his bedside, sir."

"Excellent. In the meantime, I shall prepare for your trip. I'll allow you to enter Twelve with your own guard, but we will have reinforcements standing by." President Snow dabbed at his lips with a blood stained handkerchief. "I believe Peeta may respond better if we keep Capitol security to a minimum while touring the remains of his district, but have no fear. My soldiers will be only a minute away at all times."

"And I shall have Mr. Tanner with me," Effie gave him a curt nod. "As you said, he has done a remarkable job."

President Snow gave her a nod, "Inform me when our patient wakes. We'll want to make sure he has plenty of tracker jacker venom inside of his system. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have a broadcast to air," Snow sneered.

The doors to the elevator closed and Effie let out an enormous breath of air. "Either he doesn't know about me or is playing me for a fool," she said quietly to Mr. Tanner.

"Not wearing your brooch with the hidden recording device I see," He glanced down at her jacket.

"There was an unfortunate incident at the hospital. It seemed to slip right off of my person and land under the wheels of a moving hospital bed." Effie pursed her lips in delight. "I must really be more careful." Steven Tanner let out a snort. "My. My. Are you laughing Mr. Tanner?" She turned to face him. "I didn't think you were allowed to. Wasn't that in the oath you took? No laughter or humor of any kind allowed?"

"It was actually part of my training," He said with a straight voice. "Sometimes my human side does pop up."

"Must be quite an inconvenience for you," Effie faced the elevator doors. "Goodness knows, one can't feel safe with a Peacekeeper that

has a sense of humor." She heard another little burst of laughter coming from him. "Now stop that. I might mistake you for a human being."

"Miss. Trinket, has anyone ever told you you're quite funny?"

"Yes. I've been called funny looking on more than one occasion by that...vile little man, Haymitch." She hadn't realized she sighed after saying Haymitch's name.

"Vile little man, huh?"

Effie crinkled her brow. "Yes. He's a buffoon. A drunken buffoon."

"Miss. Trinket," Steven Tanner leaned closer to her, "you may want to avoid talking about him to other people if you don't want them to know how you feel about him."

"What..." Effie flustered. "I have no feelings towards him whatsoever."

"You're about as convincing as that wig you wear," He held his arm out to her once the doors opened.

"Why I never," Effie said in a huff as she clicked her heels towards Peeta's hospital room finding him awake and looking around in a panic. "Peeta!" She rushed to his side. "You're awake."

"Yeah," he gave her a strange look. "Mom, what happened to me?"

Effie's heart jumped at the term, mom. "Oh darling," she stroked the hair off of his forehead. "You got a little carried away today during your...questioning."

"Questioning about what?" He sat upright and looked at the Peacekeeper. "Is everything okay? Why do you have a Peacekeeper with you?"

Peeta was aware that Mr. Tanner was her personal guard so she wasn't quite sure why he was asking. "Don't you remember the president appointing me a personal security detail?"

"So, he's okay? I mean...you want him here?" Peeta asked.

Effie stole a quick peek at Mr. Tanner. "He has a tendency to get on my last nerve, but I've been learning how to deal with his presence."

"Wonderful!" Dr. Avalon entered the room. "He's awake, and...how are you feeling Peeta?"

He eyed up the doctor and answered with a cautious, "Fine, I guess."

"You must tell me if you find yourself getting the shakes or begin to perspire uncontrollably." The physician began to do an exam of Peeta. "Your heart is sounding strong. Excellent. President Snow will be happy to know you're doing well."

"Okay?" Peeta reached a hand out to Effie. "Who is this guy?"

That was the second person Peeta was having a difficult time remembering. "Peeta," Effie asked, afraid of the answer, "Do you remember where you are?"

"I'm assuming I'm in a hospital," he answered.

"Where is the hospital located?" She asked.

"The Capitol?" Peeta paused and said, "I'm home, right?"

"Home?" Effie's eyes began to fill with fear.

"This is wonderful," the doctor began tapping on a computerized note pad. "Peeta, where did you reside before the Capitol?"

"Uh...District...Four? No...Twelve."

Effie's stomach was churning as Peeta went through a question and answer series with the doctor. "What happened to bring you here from Twelve?"

"I accepted a position with the Capitol to be Caesar Flickerman's co-host," Peeta squeezed Effie's hand. "Right? That's why you took me in? Because I was too young to live on my own." Effie simply stared at him blankly. Her worst fears were coming true.

"Who did you leave behind in Twelve?" The doctor continued.

"People? Um...my dad and two brothers, and...did I have a little sister?"

"No," the doctor said quickly. "Who is Katniss Everdeen?"

"Katniss Everdeen? You mean..." Peeta thought for a second then asked, "Didn't she enter the Games with me?" He turned to Effie, "Mom, why am I having a hard time remembering this stuff? Did I hit my head or something?"

"Yes," the doctor lied. "You have a terrible concussion, but don't worry, it will come back to you."

There was no way Effie could tell Peeta the truth in the middle of the hospital without giving them away. "Peeta, do you remember the Games with Katniss?" She asked hoping he would say yes.

"I think so. We both volunteered for them, and you..." He gave Effie a tiny smile, "...you helped us so we could both leave the arena. Thought up a story." His face lit up. "Yeah, I remember now. We were the Star Crossed Lovers of District Twelve. You and President Snow said if we pulled it off we could both leave the arena and I could accept that job with Caesar."

Effie's eyes flashed to the physician. "What has happened to his memory?"

The doctor pulled Effie aside to speak to her in private. "Miss. Trinket...Effie, I'm pleased to say I have finally discovered the reason Peeta hasn't been responding to the treatments we've been giving him. It seems there was a mix up in the science lab. The labels were put on the wrong containers and we have been giving him jacker juice instead of the actual tracker jacker venom." Dr. Avalon spoke with pride. "Fortunately I was able to resuscitate him and when he awoke, he ripped the tubules out of his arm. The moment I caught a whiff of honey I knew why he wasn't responding the way we wanted."

"So he's not in the hospital because of his heart?" She asked.

"Oh, no. Once he was brought back, I was able to administer the proper medications, and he was fine. If Finnick Odair has access to those drugs during the Quell, Peeta would have been back on his feet within seconds," the doctor said slyly. "He's been given his first real dose of tracker jacker venom and I must make sure he doesn't go through withdrawal from the tracker juice."

"Is it addictive?" Effie feared the worst.

"The touches of morphling in the drug tends to give it an addictive quality to one that uses it often, and Peeta has been exposed to quite a bit of it." The doctor paused before adding, "To be honest, I'm

surprised he hasn't overdosed by now. Normally one can only stand so much of it."

"But...I thought it was weaker than the regular venom?" Effie's mind began to race at the thought of hurting Peeta by switching the drugs.

"Yes, they are. However, they are recreational drugs, Effie, and can be fatal if too much is given." The doctor paused then added, "He has quite a tolerance. Under normal circumstances I would have had to given him shots to revive him after the treatments." He began to speak to himself, "I wonder if this means he'll be resilient to the regular venom? Perhaps I should increase his dosages," his fingers went to work on the computerized note pad.

'Dear me,' Effie panicked, 'My darling boy, what have I done to you? What have I done?'

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"Prim, look here," Regina motioned towards a dusty cardboard box hidden away in the room that held all of the paper files for the residents of District Thirteen.

"This looks pretty old," Prim lifted the cover off and began thumbing through each individual file. "Dr. Valero, all of these people died within the same year." She read a few of the files and noticed the date.

"These three within days of each other."

"Shh," Regina pulled Prim away from the box behind a shelving unit.

Prim's eyes grew wide with fear when she heard the shuffling of footsteps. "It's coming from the vents," she whispered.

Regina began to slowly sign to Prim, "Do you know what I'm saying?" Prim nodded. She had been taking Justus' classes and learning their language everyday since joining Regina in the medical bay.

Prim could sign the alphabet with no problems, knew quite a few words in sign language now that she and Regina were working side by side, but she stuck with using one hand and spelling her words out. "We need to bring this box back with us. Hide it in storage."

"They'll notice," Regina spelled out to her. "If they search this room they're going to know someone took it." She thought for a second. "Let's take those three files you read and look them over." Prim nodded and grabbed the files. "Let's go," Regina signed to her.

Once back in the medical bay Prim said, "I wish we could copy some of them, but they'd definitely notice if we used any of their resources."

"Oh, Prim. That's a wonderful idea." Dr. Valero dug through her pocket and found the monitoring system she used on Katniss. "I can scan the files into this. It can hold up to twenty thousand patient files."

"How do you do that?" Prim leaned over Regina's desk with her.

"It's simple, but tedious. You have to run the device over each piece of paper." She put on a pair of gloves and picked up the file of the first patient. "We'll number them. Katniss is in here as patient zero so we can start with one and then their date of birth and death." She pushed a few buttons on the little device and slid it over the first page. "One down, about a million to go."

"Why are you wearing gloves?" Prim asked.

"Fingerprints. Don't want to leave any sign of us behind. In fact, I'm going to make up some new files for these three and get rid of these. Your prints are all over them." Dr. Valero took out a few manila colored file folders. "You should go check on your mom. She's probably wondering where we've been."

"Okay, then I'm coming straight back here. I'll tell her we're studying," Prim hurried out of the room and down the hall to the main hospital. "Hi," she greeted her mother who was working with a few plants she had asked for from Thirteen's garden.

"Hi sweetie. Where have you been hiding?" Evelyn stopped working for a moment.

"Not hiding. Just studying with Dr. Valero. She's been teaching me an awful lot," Prim picked up one of the plants. "What are you going to use these for?"

"This one works well on burns, and these two can be dried then ground and put into liquid to help with digestion. Dr. Valero mentioned she was having some terrible morning sickness and I thought it might help."

"Is that the tea you used to make in Twelve?" Prim asked.

"No. This is much better. Should eliminate the doctor's sickness as long as she drinks it before each meal." Evelyn began snipping sprouts off of the plants and placing them in beakers of water. "I'm going to root them and grow some for use in the hospital only. The doctors here were very supportive when I asked them about mixing up medicines."

This gave Prim an excellent idea. "You know mom, Katniss is hunting again. Why don't we get permission for me to go out with her once or twice a week and I can forage for some herbs. I bet the doctors around here have no clue what to look for in the woods."

"Hmmm, I could ask. Do you think Katniss would mind if you went with her?" Evelyn began pulling some leaves and placing them on a wired rack.

"I'm sure I could talk her into it," Prim grinned. "She'll probably be fine with it as long as I don't try and heal all the game she shoots." Prim's mom seemed to be lost in her work. "Well, I'm going to study with Dr. Valero. See you later, mom."

"Hmmm? Oh...bye Prim." Evelyn went back to work.

Before Prim left her mother Dr. Valero entered with a uniformed soldier. "We'll be ready," Dr. Valero said to the man in uniform. "Prim," her voice was steady, but her eyes were filled with fear. "Evelyn, we've got wounded from Eight on their way in."

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"We got some great shots in there," Cressida said to Katniss.

"Wonderful footage," Messalla agreed and scribbled some notes down.

Katniss had no clue what she did. "I walked around their hospital. What did I really accomplish."

"Give yourself some credit for what you've done in the past," Boggs gave her a pat on the shoulder.

The smell of rotting flesh still stung Katniss' nose, the sight of bloody bodies, a child with one eye bandaged and the other aglow when he met her left Katniss weak in the knees. She hunched down, looked up at Boggs and said, "What I did in the past? Depending on who you talk to, I either helped or hurt this nation."

"Well, you're not perfect by a long shot, but times being what they are, you'll have to do," Boggs stood above her with a tinge of humor in his eyes.

"Gee thanks," Katniss chuckled.

"I can't believe you let all those people touch you," Gale took a spot next to her. "When that woman hugged you and said that stuff about Peeta still being a hero to her, I thought for sure you'd make a run for it."

"Shut up," Katniss tried to make a joke out of it, but he was right. It took everything she had not to race out of the giant tent the people of Eight had constructed to house their ill. She turned her attention to Boggs, "Is it like this everywhere?"

"Yes," he nodded. "We try to get aid to them, but it's never enough."

"Time to go sweetheart," the sound of Haymitch in Katniss' earpiece shocked her.

"Let's go. We've got a problem," Boggs grabbed hold of Katniss arm and hauled her to her feet.

"What kind of problem?" Katniss followed Boggs, who didn't answer.

"Get the hell out of there Katniss. Bombers are coming in!" Haymitch's voice bellowed through her ear.

Boggs reached around, pulled up Katniss' protective hood and yanked the helmet Cinna had designed onto her head. "MOVE!"

"What's going on?" Gale jogged alongside of Katniss.

"Bombers," she turned her head towards the sky, looking for their arrival, but the sky was clear.

"There's a warehouse about two blocks up," Plutarch's voice came out over the earpiece instead of Haymitch's. "Get her to safety."

Katniss, who was surrounded by soldiers and a camera crew wearing portable recording devices that resembled the shell of a beetle, jogged as quickly as possible behind Boggs when suddenly the sounds of hoverplanes roared behind her. As she flew through the air, her body being thrown into the side of a building, thoughts of never making it out alive began plaguing her. A sharp stabbing pain shot into the back of her leg as Boggs threw himself over her, shielding her from bomb after bomb being dropped. 'I'm sorry,' she thought to herself. 'I shouldn't have come here, and caused this destruction.' Her presence had to be the reason for the Capitol's assault.

"Katniss!" Haymitch's voice echoed through her earpiece the second the bombs stopped dropping. "You need to get out of there before they see you."

"You mean they don't know I'm here?" She asked Haymitch.

"Intelligence doesn't think so. They think this was planned already. Now get the hell out of there!" Haymitch screamed.

Katniss ran as fast as her injured leg could take her, finding her feet springing to life from the boots Cinna had created for her. Again she was surrounded by the group, all of them determined to protect her at all costs. "Where to?" She asked Boggs.

"This way."

The next wave of planes came in and this time it was Gale that covered her body. Katniss hunched over, one arm over her head the other in the same position it had been when she ran from the deadly jungle during the Quell. Sounds of blasts, the earth shaking beneath her, and Gale's eyes were piercing through her system. "You okay?" He asked.

"Yeah," She got to her feet the second the planes fell back. "If the Capitol isn't bombing them because I'm here, then why are they doing it?"

"The hospital," She and Gale spoke at the same time and ran towards the paltry shelter.

A term her father used to use on occasion while hunting instantly came to mind, sitting ducks, when Katniss saw the damage that the bombs had caused. This, she knew, was the reason Gale had questioned Paylor about the way they gathered their wounded together. They were easy targets for the enemy to attack, but why the hospital? Why defenseless people? The instinct to protect these people, to fight was overwhelming.

Paylor whipped her head towards Katniss and Gale, "Boggs know you're here?"

"Yeah," Katniss lied. None of her group wanted her to run towards the fighting, and she was shocked when the film crew took their position alongside of her.

"Get down," Paylor warned her. "The next wave will be coming in less than a minute."

Offers to use the guns District Eight had were declined. The bow and arrow was her weapon as was Gale's. Haymitch's constant screeching in her ear to get out of the area was making it hard for her to concentrate. She yanked the earpiece out of her ear, took position on the ground and loaded her bow with one of the fire arrows Beetee created. It had been awhile since she and Gale were able to communicate with one or two word phrases, the distance between them continued to grow, but this was the reason she wanted him by her side during Peeta's absence. Calling out the word "geese," him knowing that it meant the hoverplanes were flying in a V formation, that she should shoot the front, he the back, much like they did in the woods of Twelve. With each wave of aircraft that came in bombing the hospital, those that could ran from the structure in an attempt to be free of the fiery inferno. The ground shook, the stench of smoke and death filled the air. It all seemed to disappear as Katniss' old self resurfaced. She had a one track mind. Kill her prey. Fire arrows weren't doing the job so she and Gale switched to explosives for the next wave, and Katniss got to her feet, taking aim at the deadly hoverplanes as they soared overhead, dropping bomb after bomb, taking the lives of so many. The last of the bombers exploded midair at the hands of Katniss' weapon. Her eyes drifted down to the people that were racing around. The hospital that was no more. There was nothing she could do to help these people. That horrible feeling of

helplessness raged through her as a scene from her past flashed through her mind.

She couldn't sleep. Thoughts of Peeta had kept her up half the night. Since the day he took her hand under that damn tree her mind kept recalling the feeling of his fingers entwined with hers. The gentle way her stroked the inside of her wrist with his thumb. The way his breath felt against her skin when he rested his forehead against hers was igniting feelings deep inside of her. Feelings she swore she'd never allow, yet here she was not only wanting it, but welcoming it. Not just welcoming the rush of emotions, but welcoming them with open arms. 'Peeta,' even thinking his name made her stomach flop like a fish out of water. She needed to do something to get him out of her mind. Predawn darkness cloaked her as she headed into the forbidden woods of Twelve. Hunting was the best medicine for the disease that she found herself plagued with. 'Is this love?' She wondered as she quietly walked through the dark woods. 'It has to be.' But love wasn't what she had planned for her life. Letting an emotion like that into her heart was dangerous, almost as forbidden as the woods. She had watched her mother go through hell since the death of her father, practically letting her children starve to death. It was that loss she knew she could never afford in her life. 'This is not love,' she thought to herself as a group of pigeons flew unnoticed over her head. 'Like. I like him. This is like.' She had to be satisfied with that. 'We have to go back to being just friends. It's for the best. He'll understand. Peeta will just be happy spending time with me. We'll share lunch and be friends. That's it. It'll be easy. I can be his friend...can't I?' Gale was her friend and she never faced problems like this. Never even thought of him in a romantic way and she had held his hand before, but she couldn't recall what it felt like. Was it hard or soft like Peeta's whose skin was smooth, not at all like she imagined a man's hands to be. Like her father's were, but Peeta was a baker not a hunter or miner so it only made sense that his skin wouldn't have been affected by the harsh

elements of Twelve. His grip, on the other hand, was strong, firm a total contradiction to his demeanor, 'Or the way he touched your face,' she thought to herself. Why did she think there was much more to the boy that had taken a black eye at the age of eleven so she could have some bread? The rustling sound of leaves caught her attention, pulled her from the deep thoughts she had gotten lost inside of. Three squirrels met their demise that morning yet Katniss' problems were still alive and well. She didn't ask herself why she shot the critters when the sky was filled with birds flying south for the upcoming winter. She knew the reason as well as she knew who would buy the squirrels. The Baker. Peeta's father. A light tap on the bakery's back door produced the man. She let her eyes drift past the baker as he spoke to her about their trade, in search of the boy she was trying to convince herself she only wanted a friendship with. She thought she was being careful but the baker asked if she was looking for someone and Katniss hoped the man didn't notice the blush that crept up on her cheeks as she ducked her head down and shook her head in answer. Would he figure it out? Did he know she was there to see Peeta and not trade in her game? The sound of something metal crashing to the ground caused her to lift her eyes towards the disruption. The bellow of screaming, the witch was on a rampage, quickly followed. As Katniss accepted a few coins from the baker, she opened her mouth to say her thanks, but the door was shut in her face. Why she stopped at the tiny window a few yards down allowing a person to see into the kitchen, she didn't know, but that's when she saw it. Peeta being hit across the head with a heavy baking sheet. "Peeta," escaped out of her mouth. Anger ripped through her as her feet raced to the bakery's backdoor. She lifted her hand to bang on it and stopped. What good would she be able to do him? The image of a little boy with a black eye flashed in her mind. Katniss' presence could actually bring on more trouble for him. She rested the flat of her hand against the door and whispered, "I'm here, Peeta. Right here." She could hear the

screaming, Peeta saying he was sorry, the witch yelling not only at Peeta but his father as well when he tried to defend his son. The need to keep him safe and sound, to rescue Peeta the way he rescued her when he threw her the bread so long ago consumed her. It had been years since Katniss allowed herself to cry. She didn't need tears. They were for the weak and she was far from weak. There would be no crying for her, but telling herself that and actually complying were two different things. She could feel the threat of anguish seeping through her. The burning in the back of her nose, the tightening in her throat. She tried to take deep breaths as she slowly backed away from the door and ran back into the woods telling herself she wasn't going to cry. She wouldn't do that, but she did. She sobbed for the helplessness that ate her up inside, for the years she had let Peeta go without thanks for saving her life and being there when her family so desperately needed food, and for the boy she wasn't supposed to love.

Her film crew stood by her, the red light of a camera pointing in her face. "Katniss, President Snow has just aired the bombing in District Eight live. He says this was his way of sending a message to the rebels. What about you? Do you have a message to send them?" Cressida asked.

Haymitch's voice screamed at her through the earpiece that dangled on her shoulder. She was sure she had gotten rid of the man when she pulled the plug. "Damn it, Katniss! Think of Maysilee...of your father... You want the same thing to happen to you?!"

Katniss couldn't help Peeta the morning she discovered his mother's abusive ways. There was no one to talk to, to reach out to for help, but today...today, she realized, was a different story. She had an entire nation to make her plea to. Haymitch's message, which went out through everyone's communication device, may have caused those

around her to give her questionable looks, but Katniss knew what he was saying. Think of your child. Up to that point it hadn't even crossed her mind. As she stood with her bow in hand, she finally thought of the baby she was carrying and all of the children that were lying dead, burning in a hospital, blown to bits, that were constantly threatened by the chance of being reaped, her sister who *had been* reaped, and Rue...all of the tributes that gave their lives in the arena. This would be her child's future if she didn't do all she could now. "Yes," she answered Cressida's question softly at first then cleared her throat and spoke with an authority she had been missing for too long. "Yes," she stared into the red light of the camera as those around her withdrew, giving her the space she needed. "I want to tell the rebels I'm alive. That I'm right here in District Eight where the Capitol just bombed a hospital full of unarmed men, women and children. Why? Because Snow looks at them as slaves. When this war is over, what good will a bunch of slaves be to the Capitol? They won't be able to work so the residents of the Capitol can live in the lap luxury. There will be no survivors here in Eight." The camera panned to the hospital and all of its victims then back to her. Katniss could feel the anger building up inside of her. Emotions she had been suppressing for too long began to spill out. "I want to tell the rebels that Snow will continue to hold us prisoners in our own districts...our homes...working us to death...starving us...making our children fight in an arena to the death, just to show his absolute power, but Snow...the Capitol...they aren't as powerful as they think. See that?" She pointed to a few hoverplanes that she and Gale had shot down, the camera's lens followed her finger. "That's what *we're* capable of! That's what happens when we fight back!" She glared into the red light of the camera that was focused on her again. "When we say, we've had enough! When we stand up, united for the rights that any human being deserves! You want a fight, Snow?! We're ready for you. We are not in these Games for the Capitol's entertainment purposes." Her voice began to grow

louder with each phrase. "We are fighting for our way of life! For our children's lives! For our nation's survival! For the right to be free from tyranny and oppression!" She pointed her bow towards the burning hoverplane again, the camera zooming in on the Capitol's symbol glowing bright red amongst the flames. "Welcome to the rebel's arena! The odds are finally in *our* favor!"

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 9: Peeta Mellark, Jabberjay, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Eight: Peeta Mellark, Jabberjay

Peeta's real hijacking has started and has messed with his permanent memory. Effie is still walking a very fine line between the Capitol and the Rebellion. Katniss fought for the rebel's while visiting Eight, and she's now realizing what her actions cost.

Thank you all for reading and reviewing. It really keeps me motivated. Thank you to S and A for working so hard. They are amazing betas.

I'm on my way to see what's going on with...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

"We have to get you out of here," Boggs raced towards Katniss across the ruins of District Eight, blood dripping from his recently broken nose. A side effect of the bombing. "Come on," he scooped Katniss up into his arms and ran.

Katniss' grip on her bow was deadly. Her knuckles turned white from lack of blood flow, her body began to shake, she was chilled beyond belief and sweating profusely at the same time. She had done everything the rebels wanted as far as filming went, but disregarded direct orders from those higher up in command and went into battle. The adrenaline flowing through her began to take its effect as she tried to gain control of her thoughts. She had met the wounded, who were now blown to bits, thanks to Snow who looked upon them as vermin. She had spoken her mind about the rebellion on camera. Told the people of the nation how she felt her whole life long, and she had stood up in the middle of a battle, armed with nothing more than a bow and arrow against Capitol hoverplanes. "I'm going to be sick," she struggled a bit in an attempt to get out of Boggs' arms and found herself leaning her head over one of the strong arms that was carrying her like an infant, covering the man in vomit. The fact that he didn't flinch and kept on running towards their rescue party didn't even

register with her. The hovercraft that returned for them was a cargo craft with no seats to strap themselves into unlike the last. Plutarch's remaining team, and Haymitch were nowhere to be seen. Katniss felt herself being lowered onto the cold floor of the craft and curled into the fetal position, clutching her knees to her chest. "Peeta," her lips began to move, "What did I do? I didn't even think about banana nut today. I just..." she gasped, "...Oh my God," she said aloud. She remembered being lifted off of the ground and thrown into a building from one of the bombs the Capitol dropped, being tossed onto the cement, Boggs as well as Gale jumping on top of her to shield her from harm. "Oh my God," she said again and clutched her stomach.

"Catnip, it'll be all right. It's just the adrenaline," Gale leaned over her and rubbed her hair. "Hey," he lifted her head and placed it on her lap. "Just rest."

"Peeta. Peeta," she repeated his name over and over again. Regret consumed her. Pain was suddenly shooting through her leg as she reached blindly for the spot and felt a piece of metal sticking out of her leg. "Aaah," she screamed when her fingers barely touched it. Boggs rushed to her aid, leaving another patient's side and examined her wound while Katniss screamed not only in pain, but in frustration for her carelessness.

"I have a little morphling here," Boggs shot it into Katniss before she had a chance to stop him.

"No...Oh, God," it was too late. The medication was now flowing into her system. "We need to get back," she looked up at Gale. "Get me to Regina...Dr. Valero. Tell her about the morphling."

"It'll help you, Catnip."

"I'm...allergic to it," Katniss lied, unsure of how to explain why the drug was so harmful to her.

"What?" Boggs began looking through the flimsy first aid kit he had. "No one told us that. If I had known I would never have given you..."

Katniss' mind began drifting in and out of consciousness from a combination of sheer exhaustion and the drugs. She began humming softly to herself, not paying attention to those around her.

"Think she's okay?" Gale asked Boggs with panic in his voice.

Boggs searched through the first aid kit some more, "We don't have anything to counteract the morphling. We'll have to rush her straight to medical when we land." He called up to the pilot, "Get in touch with Thirteen. Tell them to have an emergency team ready to go. We've got wounded, and Katniss needs to be treated immediately."

"Peeta," she whispered with her eyes closed. "What are you doing out there?" She could see him standing on their balcony wearing his pajama pants looking up at the night sky. "Mmmm, I love the way you smell." She lifted the corner of her lips in a small smile. She was no longer on a hovercraft heading for District Thirteen, but back home in Victor's Village.

"Mom! Prim!" Katniss walked into their house without knocking.

"Where the hell is everybody?" She walked around the empty mansion and found her mother outside in the garden. "Hey."

"Hi there. I thought you'd be with Prim and Peeta."

"I'd like to be, but I have no clue where they are." Katniss lifted up the note Peeta left her. The bottom half of it was shredded into pieces

complements of Buttercup. "Don't know what you're making for dinner tonight, but I wouldn't complain if cat was on the menu."

Katniss' mother started laughing and said, "They went to the Town Square."

"Okay," Katniss headed in that direction. "Need anything while I'm there?"

"No. Prim is getting everything I need." Evelyn smiled. "Have a good time."

"See ya," Katniss waved at her mother and walked quickly towards the bakery, where she was sure Peeta and Prim must've gone. "Hey there Pops!" Katniss gave the man a hug and dusted flour off of herself afterward. "Where's the rest of my family?" She glared at Peeta's mother thinking, 'I do not mean you!'

"They left awhile ago. Peeta bought us out of sweets and headed for your old neighborhood."

"He did?" Katniss grinned knowing that the sweets would never make it to their home, but would be spread amongst the children in the Seam.

"Yup."

"Guess I'm on my way to the Seam too." Katniss placed a kiss against her father in law's cheek. "See you for dinner?"

"Absolutely."

"You should bring your other boys," Katniss said quite loudly, knowing they were in the front of the bakery and could hear her. "Peeta misses them terribly and we've only got about a week left before we leave for

the Capitol. It would be great if they came over for a family dinner."She had met Peeta's brothers a few times, but never really got to know them. As much as she wanted Peeta and his brothers to have a close relationship, Katniss was almost grateful she didn't develop the kind of relationship Peeta had with Prim. Since she was planning on giving up her life in the arena for Peeta, she didn't need any more people mourning her death.

Bing gave her a smile that was almost the mirror image of Peeta's. "I'll try and talk them into it."

"See ya later," Katniss let herself out the backdoor thinking, 'Got me going on a wild goose chase for you today, don't you Peeta?' Coming up on Peeta and Prim telling the Seam kids a story about a knight and a maiden swelled Katniss' heart. Prim waving a stick around calling it a magic wand, and Peeta teaching the kids how to dance once Katniss had accepted his invitation to do so left her feeling warm and content.

Prim started to clap and cheer along with the rest of the kids when their tale was over, then she ran up to Katniss and Peeta. "Take a bow." She bent at the waist and swirled her stick in the air.

"You heard the lady," Peeta grinned at Katniss. "Take a bow."

Prim couldn't stop giggling on the way home. "That look on your face when Katniss kissed you Peeta, was priceless."

"I was starting to wonder if that magic twig..."

"Wand," Prim corrected him.

*"Sorry. Wand...really worked." Peeta gripped Katniss hand in his.
"Your timing was impeccable." He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on her knuckles.*

*"What were you two doing out there anyway?" Katniss had no idea why they were acting so weird in the middle of the Seam, but the kids were enjoying themselves, **she** was enjoying herself, so who was she to argue.*

"Peeta gave me one of the books Effie sent to him filled with Fairy Tales," Prim started.

"Fairy Tales?"

"Fantastical stories of love and intrigue," Peeta explained with a flourish.

"And I just fell in love with them. They're full of magic and romance..." Prim turned around and began walking backwards in a childlike manner, something she hadn't done in a long time. "From the moment I started to read them, I got lost in these mystical worlds with dragons, fairies, princesses..."

"Don't forget about us knights," Peeta chuckled.

"Who could ever forget Peeta the knight," Prim grinned. "Today when Peeta couldn't get the kids to calm down after he brought them some treats, I thought maybe we should tell them one."

"No," Peeta grinned at Prim, "you thought maybe we should act one out. Every girl in the Seam wanted to play the role of Katniss the fair maiden." Peeta gave her a little squeeze around the waist. "I'm sort of glad the real girl showed up when she did though."

"Those kids looked like they were having a good time. A really good time," Katniss squeezed Peeta's hand in return.

"Forget the kids, I was having a good time," Peeta picked Katniss up by the waist and swirled her in a circle. "I got to live happily ever after with my one true love."

Katniss grabbed onto Peeta's shoulders as he twirled her about, her laughter floated out of her and for a brief moment in time she felt that freeing sensation that childhood provided. When worry was something your parents did and happiness was a given. They stopped in town, picking up the items their mother needed then went back to Victor's Village where they prepared and ate dinner as a family. Two additional guests showed up, Haymitch and Peeta's father. The absence of his brothers was always felt, but never spoken about. There were times in Katniss' life, regardless of whether or not she was going back into the Games, that she felt lucky, and today was one of those days. Dinner with their family at her mother's house reminded her of when her father was alive and they'd sit around the table eating whatever he had shot. Her father would tell a story or sing songs while her mother cleaned the kitchen. Peeta's dad took on that job, telling everyone about the first time Katniss came to the backdoor of the bakery to trade squirrel for bread and how nervous she was that he was going to turn her into a Peacekeeper followed up by her mother telling a story about Bing's first attempt at learning about the herbs she used in the apothecary. Laughter filled their home away from home and that feeling of happiness was back. Katniss didn't want to let it go. They had stayed at her mother's past dark, walked Haymitch home, Peeta tucked him into bed since the man was pretty drunk, then did their nightly ritual. A hot shower, Peeta would wash her hair, she would wash his, then get ready for bed. Normally she'd put on the pajama shirt that matched his pants, but tonight Katniss was filled with an almost lighter than air sensation, so she opened her closet and

searched through Cinna's designs. The nightgown she pulled out could've easily passed for a gown. Silver and blue silk, lace and a heavy blue ribbon woven throughout the bodice, then wrapping around her waist and tied into a bow. As Katniss gave the bow one last tug, she took in her appearance in the mirror, pulled on the sheer silver lace robe that came down to her ankles, and tucked her feet into the silver and blue slippers Cinna had created. She entered their bedroom doing a quick scan with her eyes, "Peeta?"

The glass doors that led to the balcony from their master suite were wide open. Sounds of night filtered through to the bedroom. The glow of the moon highlighted the bare skin of Peeta's back as he rested his elbows on the railing. Katniss glanced at the pajama shirt he had taken out for her hanging over a chair, but she didn't need it that night. Cinna had provided her with something else to wear. Though the nightgown could have easily passed for an actual dress, there was one exception, what happened when the bow that was tied around her waist was undone. Katniss stood to the side of the door so Peeta couldn't see her, but he'd be able to hear her as she spoke, "Peeta, what did Prim tell those kids to say when she waived that stick above my head?"

Peeta stared up into the sky, "Ball gown."

Katniss stepped into the doorway. "What?"

"Ball gown...wow," he had turned around and seen what she was wearing.

"What do you think?" Katniss held her arms slightly open.

"Cinna?" Peeta asked taking a couple of steps closer to her.

She nodded her head and said, "This one is called Visions of Love," she fidgeted with the robe in an awkward manner, "but I don't know why. You'd think he'd title something red that name."

Peeta grinned at her and said, "I know why."

"Oh you do?" Katniss always felt a little self conscious when Peeta walked around her and examined Cinna's items. "So tell me."

Peeta trailed his finger over the one inch silver straps that led into an intricately woven criss-cross pattern across Katniss' back and around her waist. "It matches our eyes...the silver..." his hand ran down the full skirt and lifted it slightly off the ground, "...the blue. He's used these colors before, but never like this." He released her skirt and his fingers ran over the edge of the blue lace that ran between her breasts and an area of her stomach. "See the way he put the lace on top of the material? The silver peaks out from beneath the blue...the blue stitching...it's so tiny, but...it's there." Peeta lifted his matching blue eyes to hers and Katniss instantly understood the title of the garment. "Yes...Visions of Love is perfect."

"What are you doing out here?" She wrapped her arms around him from behind and took in the scent of his skin, "Mmmm, I love the way you smell."

Peeta's sigh of contentment caused his shoulders to raise and drop back down. "It's beautiful tonight, isn't it?"

"Mmmm hmmm," Katniss ran her hands over his bare torso, then slid around to the front of him, trailing her hand across his lower back. "It was a beautiful day today too."

*"Yeah," he drank in the sight of her. "This really is stunning." He delved into her eyes. **"You're** stunning." His fingers went for the bow,*

rubbing the soft material between his fingertips. He gave the bow a tiny tug, but Katniss stopped him with her hand.

"Don't pull on that."

"Why not?"

Katniss wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed her lips against his. "Because I don't feel like standing in the middle of our balcony in a lace robe that doesn't hide a thing and my nightgown pooled around my ankles."

Peeta's brows shot up, "You mean...this little bow is all that's keeping that on you?"

"Mmm hmm," she kissed him slowly.

When their kiss ended Peeta blew out a tiny breath and said, "Cinna really is an artist. Can I please thank him for this one?"

Katniss narrowly glared at him and gave him a scowl. "If you mention that we've been using these things, the only thing you'll see me wearing at night is thermal underwear that covers me from head to toe." Wearing the designs Cinna left behind was one thing, announcing their private moments together was another.

"My lips are sealed," to prove it he placed them against hers in a slow and languid kiss. "Just so you know...it wouldn't matter if you were covered in burlap from head to toe, I'd still find you just as exquisite," his lips pressed softly against hers as his tongue lightly traced the seam of her mouth, "and just as desirable."

"Pig," she said in a teasing manner while tilting her head back inviting him to kiss that spot she loved so much on her neck. "That's all you ever think about."

Peeta trailed kisses down her throat until he reached the crook of her neck and nibbled. "If you had a wife like mine, you'd be thinking about that all the time too."

Katniss smiled and let a breath of satisfied air out. "That feels so good."

"Mmm, you taste like vanilla custard."

"You always say that," she pressed her chest against his. "I find it difficult to believe that I taste like dessert."

Peeta wagged his brows in a teasing manner. He flicked his tongue against her skin, "Sweet, warm," his lips were slowly making their way towards hers, "velvety smooth."

Their mouths met. Moist lips taking tastes of vanilla custard and, "Cinnamon," Katniss breathed into their kiss. "You taste like cinnamon and brown sugar."

"That's because I ate a piece of pecan ring."

"You didn't eat it all, did you?" Katniss pulled back, giving him a warning look.

"No," he ran his hands over her hips. "Even if I did, I'd bake you another if you wanted."

"Being married to a baker has its perks." Katniss ran her hands over Peeta's upper arms, feeling the taught muscles all the years of throwing bags of flour and kneading dough had provided. "Like these,"

she placed a kiss on his bicep. "And this," she ran the flat of her hand against his well defined stomach.

Peeta's features read content, happy, but most of all love when he spoke. "Remember the first time you hugged me beneath the oak tree?" Katniss could never forget that day. "We were so nervous." He touched the tip of her nose with his fingertip. "You were petrified."

"So were you," she tilted her head to the side and admired the view she was currently holding in her arms. "You didn't want to kiss me on the lips."

"I wasn't afraid to kiss you on the lips. I was afraid because I knew once I did I'd never be able to stop." He rested his forehead against hers, "Really think we would've been able to control ourselves since Delly and Madge hadn't joined us for lunch that day?"

A rush of emotion shot through Katniss as she recalled her first feelings of desire. "I know for a fact we would've gotten carried away," she kissed his cheek. "I might have been fighting my feelings for you emotionally, but physically...that day...I was pretty much a sappy pile of mush. Probably would have agree to just about anything."

Peeta threaded his fingers through her hair and gave her a playful scowl. "Sure, now you tell me." They laughed softly together. "Ever wish we did act on those feelings?"

"Sometimes," Katniss admitted. "But we were pretty young and inexperienced at the time."

"I've got news for you, we're still young," Peeta ducked his head down and gave her an exceptionally flirtatious stare, "though not very inexperienced anymore."

Katniss' turned her blushing face to the side. "This is a strange conversation," she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"No it's not. I'm telling you about a fantasy of mine." He turned her by the chin to face him. "Don't you have any fantasies, Katniss? Dreams you wish you could explore?"

She gave it some thought, but the only dream she had involved the end of their society as they knew it...the end of the Games, and she was pretty sure that's not what Peeta was talking about. "I don't have fantasies," she answered him.

"I do. Then again, I've been fantasizing about you since the age of twelve." Peeta looked down at Katniss and she was certain he noticed her dropped jaw by the way he started laughing. "What? You think I never had impure thoughts about the girl I was sure I was going to spend my life with?"

"But...but..." Katniss stammered. "You were twelve? Peeta," her tone was scolding, "shame on you."

"I was a twelve year old boy getting ready to hit puberty. Don't go lecturing me for being just like every other boy in the world. It's human nature, Katniss."

"Yes, but...you were just a kid."

"I was old enough to have my name put into the reaping bowl, so why not old enough to think about...certain things," his playful gaze caused her cheeks to burn. "If it makes you feel any better, I really didn't know much back then and all I thought about was what it would be like to kiss you."

"Oh," Katniss ducked her head down. "Guess that's not so bad."

"What did you think I was dreaming about throwing you onto the bed and ravishing you?" He laughed into the crook of her neck. "Oh, Katniss," he happily sighed, "those thoughts didn't come until the age of fourteen...okay, maybe thirteen."

"Peeta!" She smacked at his shoulder.

"I'm teasing," His huge smile caused her to smile in return. "There were times when my thoughts would drift to something more, but I tried to curb them...until you held my hand and agreed to be my girlfriend. After that, I pretty much let my imagination go wild. The way I figured...those were the perks of being your boyfriend."

"I...uh..." Katniss swallowed. The truth was she had fantasized about things with him too.

"Never thought about me in that way before we got married, Katniss?" Peeta teased her with a knowing tone to his voice.

She really hated it when he read her mind so easily. "No, I did." For some odd reason his bare chest seemed to be glaring at her. "The day we...uh...um..." she blew out a little breath and told herself she was being silly. "The day we hugged for the first time..." she lifted her chest and chin and spilled, "Peeta I had no idea I could want something so badly until I felt you holding me."

*He tucked strands of her hair behind her ear and searched her eyes with his. "The truth finally comes out. Katniss Everdeen wanted a...**boy**," he gasped, faking shock, to which Katniss had to hide her smile. The teasing was gone from his voice when Peeta spoke. "Like I said, it's a good thing I didn't kiss you on the lips that day."*

"Tell me about it." She rested her head on his shoulder, "But boy did I want you to."

"Guess you do fantasize."

"Yeah," she resigned, "maybe I do."

"Think we shared the same one that day, Katniss," Peeta kissed the top of her head.

Katniss wondered if there was a way she could make it come true now that they were married. "If you had a chance to do that again...relive that day...what would you change?"

"A lot of things," Peeta said sadly.

Katniss remembered what had happened earlier that morning. She realized the extent to which his mother's abuse had grown over the years. "I'm talking about the you and me part. Would you do things differently now?"

"Yes...no...I don't know. Maybe."

A plan was starting to form in Katniss' mind, but she wasn't about to let on in case it didn't pan out. "We should live out some of our fantasies, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," he nodded. "I'd give anything to make your dreams come true, but right now...would you live out a dream with me?"

Katniss' heart began to race at the thought. "Absolutely," she repeated against his lips.

Peeta threaded his fingers through hers and did something Katniss hadn't expected. "Dance with me?"

"Dance? You want to...dance?"

Peeta rested his forehead against hers. "Yes. I was just looking up at the sky and thinking to myself, we never had a wedding dance. As a matter of fact, the only time we've ever danced is when we had an audience. Even today, we had the kids..."

"And some of their parents," Katniss had noticed the adults gathering in front of their houses staring.

"Yeah... they were all watching. I want to dance with you." Peeta kissed her lightly on the tip of her nose. "Say yes, Katniss."

Her eyes had already drifted closed, her insides were already melting as her voice sighed out, "Yes, Katniss."

Peeta chuckled a little at her reply and said, "Wait here. I'll be right back." She could hear the sound of music floating out of their bedroom within minutes. "Thought you might like something to dance to," Peeta smiled tenderly as he walked across the moonlit balcony towards her. With his hand extended he said, "May I?"

The feeling of his palm gliding across her own sent a tingle up her arm. Katniss had often wondered how married people dealt with spending their entire lives with one person, she was certain eventually feelings would fade, but now she understood how couples like her parents had looked forward to growing old together. The touch of Peeta's hand used to give her butterflies in her stomach, now it did so much more than that. She relished the feeling of his hand slipping around her waist, the closeness of his lips to her ear as he guided her in a slow circle around their balcony. The sound of his humming in her ear brought on a grin and that's when she noticed the song playing in the background. "What are we listening to?"

"This is that music chip Effie sent to me. It has songs from before the Dark Days on it." Peeta looked down at her. "They're different, aren't they?"

"I've never heard anything like it before." The addictive melody...the words... They were so unlike the music she grew up with.

"I can't tell you how many nights I spent listening to some of these songs over and over again." Peeta rested his cheek against Katniss' temple. "They're like musical stories. Each one sharing a personal piece of someone's heart."

"I can see why you like them so much." She had pushed her love of music from her life so long ago, but when she heard the songs on the music chip, it was hard for her to forget how much she loved it. They danced to three different songs and then a haunting melody began and Katniss could feel Peeta's arms grow tense then loosen up. "You okay?"

"Yeah. This song..." Peeta kissed the middle of her forehead then pressed his cheek against it. "This is one of those songs I used to imagine you singing to me. It reminds me so much of you. All of them do to be honest."

"Why?"

Peeta glanced down at her, "There's so much passion in each one. When we were apart after our Games...I swear Katniss, I thought you wrote half of these just for me."

She let out a little sniff of laughter, "I think we both know I could never create something so pretty."

Peeta stopped dancing and held her hands in his. "You're wrong, Katniss. You think you're bad with words, but you're not. The way you talk to me...the things you say when you don't let your head get in the way of your heart..." he pulled her into his arms and held her, "...you have no clue the effect you have on me."

She ran her hands up his back, kissed his shoulder and listened to the words that filtered through to them. "This is lovely."

"Mmmm..." Peeta cupped her cheeks and kissed her lightly. "This part... You love me cause I'm fragile when I thought that I was strong, but you touch me for a little while and all my fragile strength is gone." The entire time she knew him, she had never heard Peeta sing. His clear baritone voice came as a pleasant surprise to her. Peeta kissed her again, drawing her mouth closer to his, taking his time, causing Katniss' whole body to tingle. "I used to lie in bed at night and listen to that part...think about that time you told me I made you look weak after our interviews with Caesar...I don't know," he held her again, "guess those words reminded me of that vulnerable side of you...the part of you that you never wanted anyone to know about...never wanted to show."

As much as she hated to admit it, she could understand where he was coming from. She hated looking...feeling weak back then, but Peeta helped her to see that it was okay to share that part of herself with another person. "If only I could say it as beautifully as the woman singing this song," Katniss said her thoughts out loud.

"I bet you could." Peeta held her hand and walked them into their bedroom when the song was through. "I bet you could pour your whole heart and soul out into the words of a song if you let yourself."

"You also think I'm the most beautiful woman alive," Katniss grinned at him, wanting to change the topic of conversation.

"That's because you are." He pushed the device that held the tiny music chip, shutting it off, and said, "Know what else I was thinking about tonight?" Katniss shook her head slowly from side to side. "I was thinking, if you weren't already my wife, I'd ask you to marry me tonight. There's something special in the air, don't you think?"

The surge of love that shot through Katniss had her weaving her fingers through his hair, pressing her lips up to his ear and whispering, "I'd say yes. I'd marry you all over again if I could."

Peeta slid his fingers underneath the lace robe and slipped it off of her shoulders, letting it fall to their feet. "I love you, Katniss."

"I love you back."

He lifted her up, placing her in the center of their bed on her knees. "Let's do it." He knelt in front of her, his eyes drifting upwards in thought. "Hmmm...I say...our twentieth...no. Twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, we can have a big blow out. Renew our wedding vows."

She loved it when he did this. Created a world of make believe where anything was possible. It wasn't something she could do with anyone else, in fact she'd probably think it was stupid, like the time Gale suggested that no one watch the Games. What good did pretending do? But when Peeta did it with her, he had a way of making her believe that their dreams of another life actually could come true. "I could wear an actual wedding dress."

"I'll wear a suit."

"Your dad could make our cake," Katniss rested her arms on his shoulders. "Chocolate."

Peeta placed his hands on her waist. "I'll decorate it. I'm much better at it than he is. No roses."

"Haymitch can finally walk me down the aisle. If he's sober."

"Effie can baby the hell out of me," Peeta's smile lit up the room.

"She already does that." Katniss brushed her nose against his. "She could keep Haymitch sober until after the vows."

"If she hasn't strangled him by then." They both chuckled. "Prim could be a one of those girls that stands up with the bride and hands her a big bunch of flowers."

"What are those girls called again?" Katniss asked.

Peeta shrugged, "No clue, but we'll be calling her Dr. Everdeen by then. Mark my words Katniss, your sister is going to be the first person to make it out of the Seam and into medical school. Dr. Primrose Everdeen. Gosh that would make me so proud."

"Me too," Katniss smiled at him. Life felt impossibly good in the arms of Peeta Mellark. "Sounds like all of our dreams are coming true."

"Sort of," Peeta tilted his head to the side and leaned in, "There's still a dream of mine I haven't fulfilled yet."

"What's that?" Katniss leaned closer to him and felt his lips brush against hers.

"To see what happens when I pull this thing." Peeta's fingers reached for the bow at the front of her dress and tugged. The garment slipped off her of shoulders, staying up since her arms were still wrapped around his neck.

"Who am I to stand in the way of a man's dreams?" Katniss leaned in and placed a hungry kiss on his lips, and dropped her arms to the sides.

Peeta pulled back and looked into her eyes, "That's two dreams you made come true tonight, Mrs. Mellark."

As she slipped her arms around his waist she whispered against his lips, "What do you say we go for three?"

Sounds of Peeta's father and her mother talking roused her from her memories of Peeta and District Twelve. "Pops? Mom?" Her voice barely above a whisper. Her head trying to place where she was and what had happened. "What..." and then it hit her. She had gone into Eight and wound up smack in the middle of the war. Without thinking she asked, fear filling her voice, "Banana nut? Where's Dr. Valero?" Katniss sat up in a panic. Hearing her mother and father in law confess that they were aware she was still pregnant, being lectured like she was five years old by both parents, and her own enormous amount of guilt had Katniss pouring out her apologies. Her mother's anger was controlled, but Katniss knew the woman was more than upset. Not only with her, but with the rebel's lack of action. She was shocked when her mother left the room. Not because she walked out, but the reason why took Katniss by complete surprise. It was the first time since her father had died she saw the woman she always wished her mother would be. There was a sense of strength, a 'don't mess with my family,' attitude that left Katniss almost feeling sorry for anyone that got in her mother's path. With her hormones going wild, Katniss could feel uncontrollable tears streaming down her cheeks, and when her father in law broke down and cried, it did nothing to help. Katniss cried with him, mourned with the man, and found herself loving him even more than she could ever have imagined. They talked with one another, attempting to sooth their weary souls when

something Bing said brought her to a realization. She had a father again, and it felt good to be loved and protected in that way. "...you became my father the day I took your son's name."

The smile on Bing's face, turned to worry. "Katniss, what can we do to make sure you don't have to go into the war zones anymore?"

"Oh, pops," she sighed and rested back against the pillow, "the only thing I can think of is give Coin her Jabberjay, but then we're risking Peeta's life." Katniss hated the way Peeta always put her first. He never stopped to think about himself, and now that there was a baby in the mix, she knew there would be no stopping him from going out into the combat zone and fighting to keep their child out of the arena. It was her least favorite *and* favorite quality about Peeta. The tears were suddenly back with a vengeance. "I wish he and I could go back in time. I'd have never pulled those berries out of my pocket and shown them to him. I would've just eaten them and let him win the Games."

"If that were possible, I'd go back and kick Myrna to the curb." Bing said quietly before adding, "I should be ashamed of myself speaking ill of my late wife. I'm not proud of thinking that way, but..." he cleared his throat, "...Katniss, no matter how hard I try, I just can't mourn her death. She never loved Peeta. She never..."

"She did, pops," Katniss found herself telling him about the morning she was outside of the bakery and overheard Peeta's mom say the words her son was so desperate to hear. "She waited until you were both gone, but she said it. She said, 'I love you, Peeta.' She may not have been strong enough to say it out loud in front of the rest of you, but somewhere inside, she loved him." Bing rested his head on the edge of her bed and clamped her hands between his. He stood that way for several minutes, complete silence filled the room then his

body began to quake as he sobbed. Katniss stroked the back of his head, a child comforting a parent during their time of need, something she had told herself to do with her mother, but never found the courage to act upon. She had changed so much since letting Peeta into her life. Grown up, and in that one day she went from an impetuous child to responsible woman. Not just Peeta's wife, but also a mother. She listened as her father in law cried about his late wife and children, then decided it was time to start facing things head on. Time to start the healing process. "Pops? Can you find Dr. Valero for me?" She asked when his tears finally subsided. Most importantly, she knew it was time to stop living a lie.

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"What do you mean she was there?!" Snow's rage was quickly boiling over as he yelled at the roomful of Capitol officials. "We had bombers in Eight and you're telling me they were taken down by that girl's arrow?!"

Effie sat to Snow's side trying her best to keep her excitement from showing. Katniss had not only survived a surprise attack against District Eight, but she took down several of the hoverplanes that were sent in. "I find it difficult to believe an arrow could cause so much damage," Effie pursed her lips trying her best to show support for her president.

Snow's puffy lips looked like they were about to explode, "Even an escort can see how unlikely that is. So please..." He looked around the room, "...explain to me how it happened."

"They weren't regular arrows, sir," one of the officials said. "One of the pilots that survived said the arrows they were shooting at them with had explosives built in."

"Where is our patient Miss. Trinket?" Snow practically growled.

"He is amongst his fellow prisoners." Effie hated bringing Peeta back to the cells that held his friends. She hated telling him he had to find out about the rebellion even more.

"Why do I have to go to jail?" Peeta followed Effie and her security guard towards the elevator. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No," Effie turned to him. "Not at all darling. President Snow knows you have developed a relationship with them and would like you to resume your position as a..." she paused briefly, "...a spy." From the look Mr. Tanner gave her she knew she had to pull herself together. "Simply try and find out about the rebellion and he'll release you."

"So I'm a spy?" Peeta stopped walking. "That doesn't sound right. I don't think I'd do that." He ran a hand through his hair. "Wow, this concussion must have really screwed up my head."

Effie couldn't speak anymore lies. She waited patiently until they were in the elevator that Mr. Tanner assured her was still safe to talk in, then filled Peeta in as much as she could. "Peeta," she spoke hurriedly, "You are not a spy and you are not a resident of the Capitol."

"But I..."

"Listen to me," she interrupted him. "I am not your mother, nor have I taken you in. President Snow wants you to believe these thing so you will be loyal to me...to the Capitol. He wants you to hate Katniss."

"Why should I hate her? I barely know her."

Effie gasped and said, "No darling, you do know her. You were not playing a part in the arena, you are in love with her and she with you."

Peeta shook his head, "No. I'd remember that...wouldn't I?"

"They're drugging you Peeta," Effie had her hands on his arms. "You must play along. Do not let them know I have told you these things or they will kill us for certain."

He glared towards the Peacekeeper. "What about this guy? You think he's going to keep this a secret?"

"Can't hear a thing you two are saying," Mr. Tanner said as he watched the lights on the elevator carefully. "If I can't hear you, then I can't tell anyone."

"He's willing to protect us, Peeta, but you must not give any information to Snow or anyone else here about the rebellion." Effie warned him. "You cannot trust them."

"What about you? Can I trust you?"

"You can," Effie assured him. "Most of all, you can trust Katniss. She is the one you must put your faith in."

"Stop talking Miss. Trinket." Mr. Tanner took Peeta's arm. "I'll take you to your cell. You need to resist me, okay?"

Peeta couldn't answer due to the elevator doors opening. "I shall have Mr. Tanner retrieve you when I am ready for you," Effie said curtly. She could see the questionable look on Peeta's face when the mood in the elevator switched at the drop of a hat, and prayed for his safety. 'I will be back, and I will get you out of here if it's the last thing I do,' she swore to herself.

"Any word on the prisoners?" Snow asked an official.

"As of right now, they're all concentrating on trying to get the boy to remember who Katniss Everdeen is," the official answered. "Of course, they're not having much luck with that."

"At least something is working in our favor," Snow let out a sniff of air. "Do we have my hovercraft ready for Miss. Trinket's visit to Twelve?"

"We're preparing it now, sir. The cloaking and anti radar devices are being tested. We should be ready to send them within the next forty-eight hours."

Snow faced Effie, "Will you be ready by then?"

"Absolutely," Effie answered. She was ready now. "Is there a specific time I should plan on leaving?" Getting as much information as she could about her trip would be crucial before letting Haymitch know what she had planned.

"We have decided to keep that information to ourselves for the time being," Snow answered. "We wouldn't want the rebels finding out about your visit and attempting to rescue their Jabberjay."

"Of course, sir," Effie nodded.

"The attack on District Eight," Snow faced the official in charge of his armies. "Other than the loss of a few planes and that...girl," he spit out, "I would say it was somewhat of a success. We have gotten rid of a huge drain on Capitol resources. How are we doing with supplies from District Three? Have we been able to..."

"Mr. President," a voice came through the loud speaker. "Sorry for the disruption sir, but we just got word that the rebels are airing some form of propaganda across the districts."

"Well, put it on my television screen," he ordered.

"We can't do that, sir. They're not airing it in the Capitol. It appears to be directed at the districts."

"Then tap into District Two's networking system and air it for me," Snow gripped the table's edge.

"We're working on it, sir, but we thought we should inform you of the spot being aired."

Snow threw a glare towards his Broadcast Defense official. "Why are you still sitting here? Did you not hear them say our nation's network is currently being compromised?! Find out how they are continually getting access to this nation's networks!"

"Yes, sir," the man stood up. "I'll do what I can to knock it off the airwaves."

"Does anyone else want to inform me about their obnoxious blunders?!" Snow scanned the group of people around the table with piercing eyes. "No? Good. Medical, where are we with our investigation on the lab's mix up with the tracker jacker labels?"

"There is no way of tracing it back to the source. It was simply an unfortunate accident."

"Accident?" Snow turned to Effie, "Do you believe in accidents Miss. Trinket?"

Every answer she gave seemed to be like a test. "I suppose that depends on the circumstances, sir." She answered carefully.

"In this case we had one of the rebellion's leaders in our prison. We were prepared to use him to our benefit, and there was a mysterious mix up in the lab." Snow leaned closer to Effie, "Does that sound like an accident to you?"

"No," Effie answered honestly.

"So who has access to that room we keep the venom stored in?" Snow asked.

There was silence until one official said, "I...I suppose any one of us could gain access to it, sir."

"Any one of you? What about medical personnel? How many of them can gain entry?"

"We're working on that now, sir," Medical answered. "There are only a handful of medical staff that have clearance to enter that room. They must have a level one authorization to unlock the door."

"In other words, anyone that steals a level one authorization code could have been able to switch those labels?" Snow slammed his hand on the table. "Anyone!" Effie took in the startled expressions of the Capitol officials. "Find out who was there, and do it quickly!"

"Yes, sir," Several officials answered and typed into a computerized pad.

"Now," Snow wiped at his lips with a handkerchief and sniffed at his rose. Effie wanted to pull the flower off of his lapel and shove it down his throat when she saw the effect it had on Snow. She was now certain there was some form of drug in it that helped to ease his temper. "Where are we with getting supplies out of District Three?"

The silence in the room was all the answer Effie needed. No one could gain access to the explosives District Three supplied to the Capitol. She could see the president's reaction to his quiet staff, and reveled in it. The Capitol was losing its hold on the districts.

"We've got it, sir," a voice cracked through the room. "We've got access to the propaganda spot the rebels are airing."

They all turned their heads towards the television screen, and listened as the rebel's Mockingjay sang. 'That's my darling little bird,' Effie thought to herself. 'Setting this nation on fire.'

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Bing paced back and forth in the hallway of the medical bay waiting patiently for news from Evelyn. It seemed to be taking forever for the doctors to work on the team that went into Eight. He stuck his hands in his pockets in a pathetic attempt to keep the shaking to a minimum.

When Katniss was rushed into the medical bay she was out cold, covered in vomit with a makeshift bandage wrapped around her calf. Rage, an emotion he didn't pride himself on caving into, exploded the minute Bing saw Haymitch Abernathy. He pushed Haymitch into a wall, holding him there by his shoulders. "What the hell happened out there?! Why didn't you tell us she was going?! She's not your child! You're not her father! You're her mentor!"

"I know. I know," Haymitch's face looked drained of blood. "I shouldn't have let her leave here. Don't know what the hell I was thinking."

"YOU WEREN'T!" Bing screamed in his face, his voice reverberated off of the walls. Haymitch's sorrow filled eyes reached his, and Bing instantly lowered his voice. He couldn't let his anger get the best of him. "That's the problem here, no one seems to be thinking of my daughter. Of my son." Bing's voice caught in his throat, "Of my grandchild." Haymitch's expression filled with shock and panic. "You think we don't know?" Bing said quietly. "Her mother has been a healer since birth, not an idiot. Katniss wouldn't continue to show signs if she had lost the baby. I'm not going to question why she's keeping it from us, though I can assume this Mockingjay thing is one of the reasons why, but I will question *you*...your motivations."

Haymitch cleared his throat. "She didn't tell you?"

"No, but I know she told you. There's no way on earth she'd go out there without someone knowing...without having someone she thought she could trust on her side." Bing dropped his hands and let his back rest against the wall next to Haymitch. His whole body deflated like a punctured balloon. "Why did you let her go out there?" The shakes were starting again.

"What did you expect would happen when she agreed to be the Mockingjay? You think she was just going to film a couple of spots

here in the safety of Thirteen and hope the rebels followed her into battle when she's not willing to go herself?" Haymitch let out a burst of air. "Son of a bitch," he pounded his fist against the wall. "I ordered her to leave...told her to get the hell out of there, but she..."

There was dead silence as a member of the medical personnel rushed from one room to another. "No one could ever tell Peeta's girl what to do," Bing sighed.

"No one, but Peeta," Haymitch agreed. "We've got to get him back, and now."

"When are you going?" It had been on Bing's mind for too damn long, but no one told him a thing.

"The plan is to air Katniss' propos, give the Capitol a distraction, and get in there." Haymitch jaw tensed. "Supposed to happen tomorrow, but once Coin finds out about Katniss disobeying direct orders to return to the hovercraft... I don't know what she'll be willing to do."

Bing gave his head a nod. "Know anyone that can fly one of those hovercrafts?"

"Yeah," Haymitch faced him, "Why?"

"In case we need to steal one and pick up my son and Effie." Bing might have said it in a lighthearted manor, but he meant every word.

"He's a lot like you, you know? The instinct to protect that girl...all his girls..." Haymitch sized up the baker. "Easy to see where your son got his passion. Used to think it was his mother that temper of his came from."

"Guess now you know why I never fought back." It wasn't the only reason Bing had tried to keep a cool head when his wife got verbally abusive with him, why he didn't fight harder for Peeta. There was another reason that he never spoke about to anyone. An incident that occurred between him and his wife when Peeta was a child. He pushed the painful thoughts out of his head as he had been doing since his wife had hurt Peeta so badly it resulted in the boy's foot being fractured.

"Bing?" The sound of Evelyn's voice echoed through the hall.

"How is she?" Bing and Haymitch asked in unison.

"She's sleeping. Dr. Valero has given her something for the pain. It's not much considering," Evelyn stepped close to the men and whispered, "considering her condition. She's exhausted, but the baby is fine. We've put the bracelet back on her to monitor its vitals."

"Can I see her?" Bing asked.

"She probably won't wake up for a little while, but I was planning on sitting with her. If you'd like to join me..." Evelyn lifted her eyes to Bing's. "I'd like it if you would wait with me."

"I'd be happy to." Bing turned towards Haymitch. "Find out what you can and let me know. I'll send for you when Katniss wakes." He and Evelyn each took a side of Katniss' bed waiting for her to wake. The room was so quiet Bing could hear the air blowing through the vents. "She's been asleep for hours. Shouldn't she wake up soon?"

"Someone on board the hovercraft gave her a shot of morphling," Evelyn squeezed her lips together. "They didn't know it would be dangerous for her so they gave it to her for pain."

Bing's heart ached. "Morphling can kill that baby."

"Dr. Valero gave her something to neutralize the effects of it. They'll both be fine." Evelyn stood up and grabbed a tissue out of a dispenser then wiped her nose. "I am so angry right now," she said it in such a soft quiet tone, Bing almost laughed. "Why do my daughters seem to think they should handle me with care as if I'm as fragile as a piece of china?"

"Because they're afraid of losing you again," Bing answered her honestly. "When you lost Clay you had a hard time keeping it together."

"No," her head snapped around. "I lost it completely. Much like my daughter did when she got back to Twelve after her first Games...when she got here. Yet no one treats her like the child." Evelyn took a few deep breaths to calm herself and asked, "Am I a terrible person?"

"No," Bing's head shot up to face her. "Why would you ask such a thing?"

"My children almost starved to death because I wasn't strong enough to handle the death of their father. Prim...Katniss, they tried to help me, and I refused to let them. What kind of mother does that?" She turned to face Katniss. "No wonder she doesn't trust me."

Bing was silent for a minute then said, "Not everyone handles grief very well." He should know. "Tell me, do you think I'm a terrible person?"

"Of course not," Evelyn said with surprise in her voice. "Why would *you* ask such a thing?"

Bing studied his daughter in law, lifted her hand in his and said, "I haven't faced my grief at all. It's there. I miss my sons, but all I can think about is how grateful I am that none of them have to suffer at the hands of my wife anymore." He faced Evelyn. "I keep waiting for the tears, but they don't come. Resentment...regret...that's what I'm filled with. Why didn't I take my kids and leave her? Why didn't I kick her out of the house? Why did I let her treat me the way she did?" His voice cracked, "Why did I let her hit Peeta?"

Evelyn reached over the bed and covered his and Katniss' hands with her own. "You did the best you could."

"My best wasn't good enough."

"Pops? Mom?" Katniss' voice spoke softly. "What..." Her sleepy eyes grew wide as her hand flew to her stomach, "Banana nut? Where's Dr. Valero?" Katniss sat up in a panic.

"Shh," Evelyn stood up and ran a hand over her daughter's hair. "The baby is fine." She kissed her daughter's temple.

Katniss slumped back in bed. "How long have you known?"

"It doesn't matter," Evelyn continued to stroke her daughter's head. "All that matters is that the two of you are all right."

"I'm sorry," Katniss closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you."

Bing saw the tension in Evelyn's jaw and said, "No one tells your mother anything. Seems I know a girl that had that same complaint, yet she doesn't think twice about keeping the people she loves...that love her, in the dark about the most important things in her life."

Evelyn's lips tightened as she said, "No one even told me you were leaving Thirteen."

Katniss' head turned from Bing to Evelyn. "I'm sorry. I'll make sure to ask your permission next time," she said with as much sincerity as she could muster up. There wasn't a lot.

Evelyn's words came out harsher than she desired, "You haven't asked me for permission to do anything since you were a child. I suppose that's my fault. I was the one that allowed you to take your father's place as head of the family, and I can't change that."

"Mom?" Katniss squeezed her hand. "I didn't think. I...I just..."

"You didn't think is right," Bing said. "I know I'm not your father, but that doesn't mean I don't love you like you're my own. I swore to my son that I'd watch out for you, and I know for a fact that he's expecting me to take care of my grandchild, but I can't do that if you don't tell us what's happening in your life, Katniss." It had been a long time since he lectured a child. "You're a married woman, and that's all fine and good, but you're still our daughter," he looked to Evelyn who gave him a nod of approval.

"As far as next time," Evelyn followed up Bing with a lecture of her own, "I'm a bit disappointed to hear that there will be one."

Katniss sucked in a breath. "If I don't do what they want...be the Mockingjay, then... Christ I hate these damn hormones!" Tears began to drip down the side of her face. "Is banana nut really all right? Please tell me I didn't hurt the baby by fighting today."

"You didn't hurt the baby, but you can't continue to keep this a secret if you want it to live," Evelyn's tone was filled with concern. "It's time you

tell the truth, Katniss. Regina and I discussed it and we both agree it's time to come clean with President Coin."

Katniss nodded her head slowly. "Yeah, I know, but I'll still have to keep up my end of the deal, mom. Until Peeta gets back, I'm the face of this rebellion."

"Then I say it's time he came back," Evelyn stood up and headed out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Katniss asked.

"To find Justus. I want to know what the heck is going on with the mission to rescue my son." Evelyn turned to Katniss, "Get some rest. I'll be back soon."

Bing lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin that bore a striking resemblance to his son's at Katniss' dropped jaw. "Ever wonder where you got your strength from?" He lifted his chin towards Evelyn's exit. "Your mother is one of the strongest women I know."

"I haven't been a very good daughter to her," Katniss paused then said softly, "to you either."

His whole body began to shake as he stared at Katniss. The little girl he pointed out to Peeta on his son's first day of school was staring straight at him. "Never imagined you would be my daughter. That day I told Peeta about you, I wished you were mine. Wished that I had married your mother...fantasized about taking both you and Peeta to your first day of school." Bing swallowed the lump in his throat. "I took three boys to that school on their first day, and now none of them are here with me." He lifted his sorrow filled gaze to hers. "You're all I've got left Katniss."

"Pops," Katniss sat up and hugged him. "Peeta's alive. I'm going to bring him back home."

Bing began to choke up, "I thought you were going to die too. I thought..." His tears began to fall. The ones he had been waiting for since the destruction of Twelve, since his boys were taken from him. "I can't lose you too, Katniss. I don't think I'd be able to take it if you died." The sound of Katniss' tears joined his as they held onto each other. "I miss them so much."

"I know you do," Katniss gripped onto the back of his shirt. "I do too. I miss Peeta with all my heart. Prim and I have talked and we don't know how you've been staying so strong."

"Promised Peeta I would be," Bing sniffed. "I can't go back on that promise." He released Katniss and walked to the box of tissue, handing a few to Katniss then taking a couple for himself. "Don't tell anyone I was crying like a baby in here," he let out a sad chuckle.

"Your secret's safe with me," Katniss blew her nose. "Think mom's going to tear Coin a new one?"

"Watch your mouth," Bing sat back down.

Katniss shrugged, "Figure I have to get all that out of my system before this kid comes."

"Katniss, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure, pops."

"Don't lie to your mother anymore. You want to keep things from me," he wiped at his nose, "I can understand that. I'm not your father, but she deserves to know the truth."

Katniss patted his knee. "You both do, and you're wrong...you became my father the day I took your son's name."

It did his heart good knowing that she felt that way about him. Now all Bing had to do was make sure both Presidents didn't kill anymore of his children. He and Katniss spoke quietly together about Peeta...his late wife, Myrna and her lack of love for her child, but it wasn't until Katniss told him about his wife saying she loved Peeta, that Bing was finally able to let the death of his family hit home. The tears that poured out of him were for all of his children. His sons that lived in fear of a woman who was supposed to protect them. The son that took the brunt of his mother's violent outbursts yet grew into the kind of man Bing wished he could be, and the woman he thought he no longer loved.

She hadn't always been that way. Myrna Mellark was once a happy, loving woman, and though Bing grew to love her, he was never in love with her. His heart always belonged to Evelyn. Over the years his wife came to realize his lack of emotion towards her, saw him stare at Clay and Evelyn Everdeen as they walked through the Town Square of District Twelve with envy in his eyes. He could recall his wife suggesting they have a child, maybe that would help their marriage, but it didn't. Bing had felt horrible for not loving his wife the way he should have. He struggled to find ways of making it up to her, but short of professing his undying love for her, he failed horribly. One day as he was putting dinner on the table he noticed that she was smiling at their infant son, Whytte. "Myrna?" Bing called to her, "What do you say we have another baby?" Their second son, Miche was born a little over a year later, the product of Bing's guilty conscience. The moment Bing held his second son in his hands he knew he had made a mistake by suggesting they have another child. It wasn't that he didn't love Miche, it was simply because Bing realized that he had been trying to provide his wife with some form of love. The love of a child, though wonderful,

was no substitute for that of a husband. He doted on his boys, grew close to them, as he and his wife drifted apart. His first two children had been planned. Peeta, on the other hand, had been an accident. Bing remembered when it occurred. He and his wife hadn't been intimate with one another since their second child was born, and he was fine with that, but the afternoon he saw Evelyn walking through town on her way to meet her husband from work, Bing felt his heart break. It was his and Myrna's wedding anniversary, and that night when his wife came to him, he hadn't meant to say "I love you, Evelyn," but he did. Neither one of them spoke of it, and two months later Myrna threw a loaf pan at his head saying that he had infected her with his seed, and she wanted to get rid of the baby. There was no medical reason for her to abort their third child so Myrna had no choice but to go through with the pregnancy or break the law. Myrna barely held Peeta as an infant, and when he was old enough to walk, she gave him his first spanking for getting in her way while she was walking through the back of the bakery. Peeta was just over a year old, and Bing was furious. He comforted his crying son, "Mommy didn't mean it, Peeta. She's just in a bad mood today," but Peeta was too young to understand. At the age of three, Bing left to make a delivery and came home to find Peeta with a large bump on his head. Myrna had said he walked into the metal prep table, but Peeta couldn't stop crying and cowered whenever Myrna walked by him. While his two oldest boys were disciplined with harsh scoldings, Peeta's spankings continued. Bing had considered leaving his wife several times, but he blamed himself for her hatred of the life and loveless marriage she was stuck in and stayed out of obligation. The day she hit Peeta causing him to fall down some stairs had been more than any decent father would put up with. He took his son to the doctor and found out about the hairline fracture his wife had caused. Bing made an excuse, never blaming his wife when the doctor asked what caused it, took Peeta home and tucked him into bed, giving his

son a good dose of sleep syrup to keep him in bed and help relieve the pain. The bakery had been absent of costumers, their older boys were at school and Myrna had started to complain about all the work she was left with because Bing had to spend his morning by caring for that "waste of a child she had to spew out." Bing didn't know where the fury came from, but he pushed Myrna up against the wall and held his arm to her throat, pressing down on her windpipe and watched as her face turned red, her hands struggled at his thick, burly arm, which easily held her in place, and her eyes filled with fear. When her eyes started to roll back in her head, Bing ripped himself away from Myrna. He was going to kill the woman and it didn't bother him a bit. 'You're no better than her,' his head rang out in thought. 'Hurting someone weaker than you out of anger.' Bing took a cleansing breath and said in a low voice, "Don't touch him again." He spent the rest of the day and night sitting by Peeta's bed, comforting his son when he woke in the middle of the night crying because he had a nightmare about mommy pushing him off the roof of their bakery. Myrna had kept her distance from Peeta for a while after that incident, Bing taking the brunt of her verbal abuse, allowing his wife to take her perpetual bad mood out on him. Never fighting back for fear of losing his temper again. After awhile he began to believe the things his wife called him...said to him, and he found himself unworthy of being a husband and a father. He no longer thought of Evelyn or watched for her. He didn't deserve her. He was certain now that he was never worthy of her love. Of anyone's love. When Peeta's abuse started back up Bing tried to defend him by reasoning with Myrna, but he found himself filled with cowardice. Afraid of the retribution she'd enact if he did something to her. Afraid of not being able to control himself and taking her life...being put to death for killing her and having all three of his sons in District Twelve's orphanage living a life so much worse than what they were already a part of. There were times in his marriage when the woman he married would show up, and the Mellarks were a

normal, happy family, but the words "I love you" were never spoken to Bing or to Peeta for that matter. Those words hadn't been spoken since the birth of Miche.

Now Bing found himself crying for the woman he had no longer loved. For the person he turned her into. For the man he had become. "I'm so ashamed, Katniss. It was my fault she hurt Peeta. Mine."

"No, pops, it wasn't. She had a choice. We all do." Katniss rubbed the back of his head. "She was his mother, and it didn't matter whether or not you two had problems, that's no reason for her to take it out on Peeta." Bing sniffed into her blanket and continued crying until he finally felt purged.

"Can you get Dr. Valero for me?" Katniss asked him.

"Yeah, sure thing." He pushed a button on a tiny remote attached to Katniss' bed and wiped his nose at the same time. "My daughter would like to see her doctor, please," Bing said when a strange voice asked what he needed.

"You'll need to find mom and Prim too," Katniss wiped away Bing's tears. "Go blow your nose and hurry back. I need to show you something."

"Want me to get Haymitch too?" He asked.

Katniss gave it some thought and said, "Yeah. This is something for the whole family."

"What about Gale?"

Katniss shook her head, "No. Just the immediate family."

Bing entered the hospital room with Haymitch by his side to see Katniss' bed surrounded by Evelyn, Prim, Dr. Valero and her husband. "We all here?" Bing asked.

"Yeah," Katniss looked almost eager. "Justus, would you mind?" He gave his head a nod, and left them with his wife, shutting off the light on his way out. "He's going to stand guard while we do this." Katniss turned her eyes towards her doctor. "Go ahead Regina."

"Okay," she smiled and placed something over Katniss' abdomen. "Here you go."

A large image was projected into the air. Bing stared at it, listened to the sounds that was coming from the tiny machine that was placed over Katniss' belly. "Is that..."

"I really wanted Peeta to be the first one to see it, but I think we all needed this today," Katniss looked around at her family's smiling faces. "This is banana nut. Banana nut, these are your grandparents and your aunts."

"Aunts?" Prim asked.

"Mmm hmm," Katniss nodded. "Aunt Prim and Aunt Regina. If it wasn't for Regina and Justus' quick thinking this baby wouldn't be here right now, so I think that gives them the honor of being an aunt and uncle. Your uncle Justus is watching over our room right now so no one comes walking in, but don't worry, we'll do a formal introduction later," Katniss spoke as though talking to the baby. "Show them the heart, Regina."

Dr. Valero's face had a huge smile on it when she circled the white pumping blob on the screen. "This is it and that noise you hear is the baby's heartbeat."

Katniss told them about the night she and Peeta picked out the names and why they were chosen. "Pops, if you hadn't told Peeta about my dad's voice that first day of school, who knows if he would've noticed me," she smiled. "And Haymitch...mom..." Katniss flashed her eyes to her mockingjay pin that was sitting on the table next to Peeta's locket, "...Peeta and I both believe that Maysilee kept us safe during our Games. So...what do you guys think?"

The whole room was silent, Prim's face beamed like the stars in the night sky, Evelyn was holding in her tears. Haymitch looked like he swallowed a frog, and Regina was thrilled to be considered an aunt. "Welcome to the family banana nut," Bing said, his words and face full of pride and love.

"We can't change what we did in the past," Katniss said and patted her father in law's hand, "or bring back the people we've lost, but we can be grateful for all of them. Without our past, this baby would never be here."

"I'm gonna be a grampa," Haymitch said with an almost giddy tone in his voice.

"Yup," Bing shook his hand. "We both are." He faced Katniss who was staring at him and mouthed the words, "Thank you." In that moment, Bing finally felt worthy of being loved again.

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Haymitch was on a mission when he sought out Boggs being treated in the medical bay. Katniss had been in the arena, one of the deadliest places to ever exist, yet Haymitch worried more when she was fighting against the Capitol's bombers. Though Haymitch was always concerned for his kid's safety, today's attack scared him like none other. Katniss had faced danger before, but she always had Peeta close by determined to protect her. Regardless of who had been in Eight with Katniss, Haymitch didn't trust any of them as much as he trusted Peeta. His heavy footfalls stomped down the corridor of the medical bay stopping when he caught a glimpse of President Coin's right hand man. "Boggs," he greeted the man then dismissed the medical personnel standing in his room. "You guys done here? Can we have a minute?"

Boggs' glared at Haymitch through a flesh toned mask, holding his broken nose in place and spoke. "What do you want Abernathy?"

When the last of the medical team exited the room Haymitch asked, "You plan on ratting Katniss and Gale out to Coin?"

"About them ignoring a direct order from their superiors...endangering all of our lives...putting the only figurehead this rebellion has in the line of fire..."

The way the man said it, Haymitch wanted to report Katniss himself. "Okay. Okay," he held up his hand to stop the man's ramblings. "So the girl has a few issues when it comes to authority. Who doesn't?" Haymitch knew he did. "But she was only doing what we wanted her to do...show her courage to the world."

"And putting lives at risk in the process," Boggs' tone was controlled yet frustrated.

"She thought she was saving lives, and who knows, maybe she did. She did take out a few of those hoverplanes." Haymitch didn't beat around the bush. "You telling Coin or what?"

Boggs' hand lifted to the mask on his face then said, "The way I see it, there's nothing to tell. Katniss acted like the Mockingjay out there today. As you said, she did what we asked of her." Haymitch's lip quirked at the man's answer. "How is she doing? I asked one of the doctors here to check her medical records. Sure enough there was a warning on there in regards to her allergies. The girl's got a list of them." Boggs made a little grunt. "That morphling I gave her didn't harm her, did it?"

"Nah," Haymitch could have sworn Coin's commander was genuinely concerned for Katniss. "That doctor of hers was able to give her something to counteract it. She'll be fine. Got a bad gash in her leg, but they fixed that right up."

"Good." Boggs' grabbed his soiled vest off of the hospital table and stood to leave. "I'm going to say hello to my wife and kids. You should probably make sure those Capitol people don't let their mouths run wild."

Haymitch gave the man a nod, thinking, 'What do you know sweetheart. I think you've got a fan in that man.' Catching up with Plutarch and his crew, making sure they didn't mention Katniss' direct violation of orders was next on his list, but it seemed Plutarch was one step ahead of him.

"Haymitch," the man called to him, meeting him en route. "We must figure out a way of keeping Katniss' actions today to ourselves. There's really no reason why we should let everyone know of her blatant disregard for her superior's orders, is there?" He asked innocently. "It really made for wonderful television."

"Keep your people quiet and I'll worry about everyone else," Haymitch felt a burden lifted off of his shoulders knowing everyone was on the same page. Now all he had to do was stop being pissed off at Katniss. 'Good luck with that,' he thought to himself as he headed towards her hospital room at the request of Peeta's father.

Haymitch had given up on life after his Games. He had lost everyone he loved, been taken to the Capitol at the age of sixteen and introduced to wine. No one thought anything of giving him the alcoholic beverage, he was after all, a victor, but the young boy found he enjoyed the way the alcohol made him feel. It helped him to sleep at night and battle the memories of the arena and loss of his loved ones. As the years progressed so did his taste for booze. His attempt at curbing his cravings for it during the Games gradually decreased. Soon he found himself searching out the substance when the Games weren't in play. Finding a supply of alcohol in Twelve was his good fortune, or so he thought, and then one day Effie Trinket walked into his life and made him question all of his choices. Over the years he and Effie verbally battled one another about the way Haymitch lived, yet the woman never faltered when it came to Haymitch...anything really. He may have despised the Capitol busy body, but he respected her. Caring for her hadn't been in the plans for his life, not that he had one, but neither did being a victor, so Haymitch tried to take his feelings for Effie with a little bit of patience and a lot of whiskey. He hadn't been in love with her when he realized he actually cared about the broad's well-being, but Haymitch knew, no matter how hard he tried to keep people at a distance, once a year, every year, Effie Trinket would show up in her funky Capitol attire and he'd have a friend to face the Games with. She may not have thought of him that way for quite some time, but Haymitch knew the woman actually gave a damn about him. Really, she was about the only person other than Chaff that actually cared. Then Katniss and Peeta entered his life. Two completely different people from completely different areas of Twelve.

They should have been natural born enemies, but like Haymitch and Masilee they broke the rules society had set for them and fell in love with each other, both of them in the same position he had been in during his Quell, and again Haymitch's life turned upside down. He told himself he didn't give one shit about the pair of kids from Twelve, but he did. He loved them. It was a lot harder for him to accept that over Trinkie simply because he had years to grow accustomed to the escort. Katniss and Peeta on the other hand swept into his life like one of those toxic tornadoes they faced in the Games and left a lasting impression. He told himself he only gave a shit because they won the Games on their own terms and not the Capitol's...they were an important part of the rebellion he had joined many years before. Yeah...he lied. As Haymitch stood around Katniss' hospital bed with the rest of her family, staring up at a distorted blob she and Peeta affectionately called, banana nut, he came to the realization that he was part of a family again. It took Effie Trinket over a decade to help Haymitch see he was worthy of more than the life he chose for himself, and Katniss and Peeta a few days to show him how good it felt to put someone else first. Their selflessness inspired not only a nation, but a drunk. "I'm gonna be a grampa," he hadn't realized how giddy the words sounded when they came out of his mouth or the way he'd feel when he heard that blob's beating heart, but the anger Haymitch felt when he walked into Katniss' hospital room faded into concern. He went back into her room after meeting up with Plutarch to see Peeta's Jabberjay propos and waited quietly by her beside, snacking on some of the lunch they had brought in for her because he hadn't eaten all day.

"Hey," Katniss looked up at him.

"Hey," Haymitch glared at her, and dumped her earpiece on the blanket in front of her. "Maybe you're not sure how one of these works, so let me explain it to you. You shove this thing in your ear, I talk, you

listen. If you have a problem with that, we'll try this one," he dumped a metal device next to the wired earpiece. "This gets fitted around your head and locked into place," he dangled the key in front of her face, "and I'm the only one with a key."

"Okay," Katniss scowled at him.

"Oh, but wait," he opened the palm of his hand and showed Katniss his final threat. "In case that doesn't work, this one gets surgically implanted and then you get to listen to my sweet and charming voice twenty-four hours a day." His left eye twitched. "Got it now?"

"Yeah," Katniss spat at him. "Got it. I screwed up."

"You're damn right you did."

"Fine!"

"No, not fine!" Haymitch held his finger under her nose, "None of what you did today was fine! None of what you're doing is fine! Lying to everyone, keeping secrets from me...what else have you been keeping secret, Katniss?!"

"Nothing," she harrumphed crossing her arms over her chest. "My whole life's an open book, okay. And don't worry. I'm planning on telling Coin about the baby. I can't keep this crap up."

Haymitch was surprised to hear her say that considering the girl could be as hard headed as a mule. "Want my opinion?"

Katniss let out a huff of air, rolled her eyes at him and said, "Even if I said no, you'd give it to me."

"That's very true," Haymitch sat back in his chair. "Don't say a thing to Coin yet. Let me figure out how to play this. She's gonna be pissed as

hell when she finds out and she can't take it out on you since you're in front of a camera and all, but she can take it out on Justus and Regina. Let me think on this and once I figure out what to do we'll tell."

"I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this a secret Haymitch."

"A secret?" he let out a burst of laughter. "Sweetheart, you *haven't* kept it a secret. I'm surprised the kitchen staff hasn't figured it out considering you eat more than anyone else in the entire district."

"Shut up," Katniss said as she reached for her lunch.

"Your mom said to drink that cup of tea before you eat so you won't throw up your food." Haymitch pointed it out to her. "And I ate some of your lunch." He shrugged, "I was hungry and you've got enough there to feed all of Twelve."

"Considering no one lives there anymore, that's not saying much," Katniss glared at him. "I'm eating for two. Don't touch my food or I'll report you."

"Yeah, sure you will sweetheart." He wasn't sure if he should tell her what he found out about Peeta's rescue mission considering she had tears dripping down her cheeks and she didn't even know it, but then he remembered he swore on Effie's life not to keep anything from her. "So listen...as far as getting our people out of the Capitol...they're postponing it another day so they can fill the airwaves with airtime assaults."

"What?!" Katniss sat straight up. "No! They have to go get him."

"Listen sweetheart, I want them to go too, you know I do, but we have to be smart about this." He gave her a disapproving look, "Even though I'm not thrilled with what you did today, Plutarch's team thinks

they should be able to come up with some really good footage for a spot. Between that and the one they've created for Peeta... trust me, Snow will have his army spread thin with all the fighting that'll be going on around the nation. We wait that extra day and we should be able to swoop in, pick up our people and get out while Snow wonders what the hell happened."

"Meanwhile Peeta could be beaten to death," Katniss let herself drop back against her pillow. "How do we know they won't keep postponing it?"

"This is the only time sweetheart. I swear it." He gathered the gear he dropped onto her bedding in his hands. "Your father in law, Justus and I are gonna swipe a hovercraft and go get them if they don't keep their word about this rescue."

Katniss let out a pathetic laugh. "Yeah, right."

Haymitch leaned over her bed and said, "That's exactly right. Even that Lavinia girl has volunteered to join the army here because she wants to help bring Peeta home...make Snow pay."

"She does?" Katniss' brows shot up.

"That's right." Haymitch pointed at Katniss, "That's you and Peeta sweetheart. That's the power you two have, and Coin wants that on her side. She'll keep her word."

"I hope so," Katniss began to eat her lunch. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Haymitch turned to leave then looked back over his shoulder at her, "Quit singing in your sleep. It's annoying."

"I don't sing in my sleep," Katniss said with her mouth full of food. Haymitch began reciting a few words to her. "Okay...fine," she succumbed, "I sang in my sleep. Get out and let me eat in peace."

"Get some rest sweetheart. Tomorrow's another day." But it wasn't the next day when Haymitch saw Katniss again, it was later that afternoon when she was wheeled into the command center on her hospital bed to watch the finished propos of her visit to District Eight. Haymitch had to admit it was pretty inspirational considering it came from the girl. He was sure the boy would have added something more to it, but Katniss didn't suck. Then came the propos of her and Peeta and the whole room was silently glued to the television screen. There were sniffles and a lot of people clearing their throat, holding back the emotions the propos stirred up. Haymitch, himself, was moved as they watched their Jabberjay manipulating the people around him with his words, but it was Peeta's lack of words that would leave the nation stunned at his bravery, and how much he was willing to do for Katniss' sake. Haymitch had been upset to begin with when Plutarch's editing included Peeta's moving his mouth to Katniss, but in the context of the propos, it worked. The room exploded with applause after the airing, Plutarch and his film crew took their appropriate kudos, while Katniss stared at the television monitor where Peeta's image had just been, frozen in place, looking as though she were reliving each moment that was played out in front of her. Haymitch felt bad for the girl, but she was handling it like a pro. Talk began about other propos that would move the rebels who were fighting across the districts, and though Haymitch thought it was a good idea to do a spot called We Remember, that featured past tributes that died in the arena, he wanted nothing more than to forget. Remembering was too damn painful without a bottle.

"What was that girl's name you were allies with, Haymitch?" One of Plutarch's staff asked.

Haymitch didn't answer out loud. 'Maysee,' he thought to himself. 'Maysilee. The prettiest girl in District Twelve. The smartest too.' He gripped the edge of the chair in front of him and thought of Effie, 'The prettiest woman in the Capitol. Definitely the smartest person I've ever known.' He had no idea why these two women ever gave a shit about him. One he lost at the hands of the Capitol, the other was playing an even more dangerous game than the first. He waited until the majority of the group was gone, Boggs, Plutarch and his assistant, Gale, Beetee, Justus and Coin were all that was left in the room. Gale, Haymitch noticed was getting quite chummy with Coin, but blew it off. "Let's talk rescue. Time to nail down a plan and get our people out of there."

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She had too much time to think when she sat alone in a hospital room, so Katniss was nothing but grateful when Regina moved her into the same room as Finnick for the remainder of her stay. "Seriously? You *still* haven't put any pants on?" Katniss asked him as they wheeled her bed into the room.

"Katniss!" Finnick smiled, and leapt to his feet. "Why should I bother with pants when I know you want to admire these rock hard thighs?" His eyebrows moved up and down in a teasing manner.

Katniss couldn't help but laugh at the man. "I'm an ab girl," she chuckled, so put your pants on because it's doing nothing for me.

"That's why I miss Johanna," Finnick pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms. "She knew how to appreciate a man's ass."

"I know. She called Peeta cinnamon buns."

"You knew about that?" Finnick's face was full of surprise, and their conversation of their missing loved ones began. They didn't mope, but they did share funny tidbits of information about those still left in the Capitol. Finnick shared stories of Annie and Johanna, Katniss of Peeta and Effie.

It was a welcome feeling having dinner alongside of Finnick in their hospital room. Digestion was a much easier process when the person eating across from you didn't expect you to be the savior of a nation. It was a lot easier with the help of the tea Katniss' mother mixed up too. As she ate the bowl of fish stew, Katniss was thankful she wouldn't be tossing it up. There was a sense of ease between Katniss and Finnick that began forming in the arena, and grew now that they were in Thirteen together. They were both suffering, going through hell knowing their loved ones were in Snow's hands. They avoided speaking about it until the propos of Katniss and Peeta aired. "They were supposed to keep his message to me a secret," Katniss said sadly.

"It looks like he's telling you he loves you, Katniss. I think the way they used it works to his benefit," Finnick reassured her. "Let's shut it off before they run it again."

"Wait!" Katniss called out before Finnick could shut the television off. "That's Caesar Flickerman," she spoke to herself. An interview of Peeta was announced by the long time host of the Capitol's Hunger

Games. "Oh, Peeta," Katniss' hand flew to cover her mouth at the sight of him. "What have they done to you?" The glow of his body polish was gone, replaced by dull, pale skin. His eyes that always sparkled held fear and looked lost...empty. His muscular body was now thin. "It's only been days since I've seen you," she spoke to Peeta's image on the television screen. "What have they done to you?" But it hadn't been days. The answer to the rebel's question about why Peeta looked so healthy during his initial interview was answered. He had been gone for weeks and being tortured from the moment he finished his first interview with Caesar. She and Finnick watched as Peeta spoke, Katniss staring at his lips the entire time for some form of message, but none came.

When it was over Finnick ordered Katniss to shut the television off. "We didn't see it," he reached for her. "If they ask, we shut the TV off right after the airtime assault aired. We never saw Peeta."

Katniss nodded absently, killing the power from the television and continued to eat. Shoving spoonfuls of fish stew into her mouth, chomping down on the piece of bread she was provided.

"Katniss," Plutarch and Fulvia entered her room. "Did you see it? It's being played all over the nation. We're unable to reach the Capitol, but it will do more good in the districts than there right now."

"It was great, Plutarch," Katniss tried to push images of a feeble Peeta out of her mind.

"What did you think of Peeta?" Fulvia asked.

"He was the star of your propos," Katniss answered. "No one in this country will be questioning his motives behind calling for a ceasefire anymore." At least she hoped they wouldn't after the airing of his

interview with Caesar, she could see how the people in the districts might question Peeta.

"Katniss and I were saying how moving it was watching the way Peeta always put others first." Finnick gave Plutarch a rap on the back. "You guys did an exceptional job with it."

"Did you continue to watch afterward?" Plutarch was obviously fishing.

"Honestly, seeing it the few times I already have was enough for me today." Katniss' stomach was churning. "We shut it off the minute it was through. Did you air it again right after?"

"We'll be playing it as often as possible," Fulvia answered. "Our plan is to fill the airwaves with that one over the next twenty-four hours, then follow it up with the one from District Eight."

That's when the rebels were planning on launching their rescue plan.

"Well, congratulations to you both," Katniss said with as much gumption as she could muster up. "You put together an extraordinary airtime assault."

"Yes, we did," Plutarch looked down at his computer's screen and pushed some buttons. "Come Fulvia. We still have a few bugs to work out of that second Propos, and a script to write for Finnick."

Katniss sat staring at the remnants of stew in the bottom of her bowl which quickly began to blur. Tears fell straight down causing a little splash. Food had quickly become her enemy. While she was eating three meals a day plus snacks Peeta was being starved...beaten...who knew what else. That night when she ran to the bathroom to throw up, it had nothing to do with the baby and everything to do with its father.

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"Bring them to me!" Snow's uncontrollable anger after watching the rebel's propos caused Effie to fear for the prisoner's safety.

"Yes, sir," Effie quickly got up and exited the conference room, leaving the rest of the officials to take the brunt of Snow's rage. "Come, Mr. Tanner," she led him to the elevator and began speaking the moment the doors were closed. "My computer? Do you have it?"

"Yes," Mr. Tanner eyed her suspiciously. "Why do you need it?"

"The rebels aired a propaganda spot across the nation, and now our president wants Peeta to go on air with Caesar Flickerman." Effie held her hand out waiting as Mr. Tanner dug it out from beneath the protective vest that was part of his uniform. "I wonder if I can..." she began pushing buttons without knowing what she was doing. "For criminy's sake. How does this thing work?"

"Don't you know?"

"Plutarch didn't teach me much about it. Just the basics," Effie was growing quite frustrated.

"Give it to me," Mr. Tanner said with an exasperated sigh. "I'll figure it out." He quickly dashed his fingers over some buttons and asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want to pull up the propaganda message so the rebels in the jail cells can see it."

"Are you insane?!" Mr. Tanner shoved it back into his vest. "I am not letting you show them this rubbish."

"Oh, you...detestable..." Effie reached for the computer only to have her hand smacked away.

Mr. Tanner avoided her advancing hands towards the computer. "Miss. Trinket, if you're not careful I'm going to think you're trying to take advantage of me."

Effie's whole face turned red, "How dare you!"

Mr. Tanner's lips quirked. "Knew that would stop you from digging through my clothes." He glanced down at her. "What makes you think you can show them a recording on this computer without Snow knowing about it?"

"He wants Johanna and Peeta to be brought up to him. We'll have them all in the elevator with us, so I thought..." Effie pursed her lips. "Not that it matters anyway. Why I ever thought you could do something on that computer that I am incapable of is beyond me."

"Oh really? Is that a challenge Miss. Trinket?" He asked with an arched brow.

The tip of Effie's pointy high heel shoe tapped away at the floor. "No. Though I'm certain it would pose quite the challenge for you, Mr. Tanner." She stood in silence as the elevator reached its destination and the doors opened. "You there," she pointed to some Peacekeepers, "bring Peeta Mellark and Johanna Mason to me."

Within minutes the trio appeared in front of Effie and Mr. Tanner.
"Please cuff them," Effie ordered a guard tersely.

"Great," Johanna rolled her eyes, "Today's torture session will be brought to you by the Capitol's most pretentious bitch." Effie tried not to cringe when the guard that fastened Johanna's wrists together backhanded her across the mouth leaving a split lip and blood dripping from it. She ignored Peeta's immediate defense of Johanna and admired the woman that licked the blood off of her lip like it was nothing, and said, "I'm sorry, would you prefer stuck up bitch to pretentious?"

"Leave her be," Effie ordered before the guard took his fists to her. "President Snow is waiting for these prisoners." She faced Johanna and Peeta. "Get in!" She snapped at them then stepped inside of the elevator alongside of her guard and her friends.

"All right, let's see what we can do with this thing," Mr. Tanner pulled out the computer and tapped at some buttons the second the doors were closed. "Here you go, Miss. Trinket." He handed it to Effie. "The next time you want to manipulate me, try using the word *please*, it goes a long way with me." He gave Johanna a once over and said, "Mason...big fan of your Games," then took out a key card and stuck it in the elevator's control panel causing it to stop mid floor. "You've got about five minutes before I have to get this thing moving again, so hurry up."

"Who the hell is this guy?" Johanna thumbed at him.

"Oh my," Effie pushed a button on the computer screen and said, "Johanna be quiet. The rebels have sent a message you must see."

"And you're showing it to us in front of Hagar the horrible over here?" Johanna's whole face contorted. "Great, now we're all dead."

"Shut up, Mason," Steven reached over and pushed the buttons on the computer for Effie, "This is play. This is stop, and this shuts it down."

"What message did they send, mo...Ef...Effie," Peeta corrected himself before calling her mom again.

"Watch and see," Effie grinned as soft music began to quietly play from her portable device.

A black screen with white lettering appeared. "Peeta Mellark. Jabberjay." a still of Peeta during his interview where he called for a ceasefire was shown. His image dissolved, and another picture appeared of Peeta and Glimmer filled the screen as he looked over the bow and arrows the Gamemakers had put in the Cornucopia during his first Games. "'Everyone thought the worst of him when he first joined up with them,'" Katniss' voice spoke in the background, "but it didn't take long for Peeta's real motives to show."

"Any good with these?" Glimmer asked.

Peeta shook his head and said, "District 12, remember? Coal mining."

Glimmer took an arrow out and twirled it around in her fingers. "What about the girl on fire?"

"A bow and arrow? Katniss?" Peeta chuckled. "Not likely." The scene of Katniss shooting an arrow at the bag of apples and blowing up the Careers' supply played showing Peeta's ability to easily lie.

Katniss' voice was heard again. "He was willing to die...be tortured...so I could live, and he's doing it again. Doing what he has to...saying what he has to, so Snow won't kill me."

The scenes continued to change from one to another of Peeta misleading the Careers during the Seventy-Fourth Hunger Games. Him leading the Careers in the opposite direction of Katniss while she walked through the woods. Peeta running into her snare and mouthing, "I love you," to the hidden cameras. Then a shot of him and Katniss standing across a river from each other.

Peeta's face morphed into one of love the moment he caught sight of Katniss sitting on a rock at the edge of the riverbank. He looked over his shoulders checking for signs of danger, then turned back to her. "My God, I love you," Peeta's voice echoed softly.

From across the river Katniss spoke, her voice a contradiction to the girl everyone had come to know. It was tender and loving, "It matches your eyes, Peeta.," she said of the flower she had picked.

"What are you thinking about over there?" Peeta smiled at Katniss as he placed the cap on the last of his water bottles. "Stay safe, Katniss." Peeta whispered to her from across the river. Their images slowly fading away and being replaced.

Katniss and Prim sitting on a rock somewhere in the woods was now featured. Katniss held her arm out, pulled off a black band and showed Prim what it had been covering, "Each scar on my body has a...story behind it, but they don't really make a difference because Peeta's not here for me to talk to...to," She sighed, "to share them with." Katniss looked into the woods. "President Snow wiped all of those away from Peeta when they captured him from the arena. Gave him a body polish, as if buffing away the scars on the outside would hide the fact that we went through hell together." Another picture of Peeta during his ceasefire interview replaced Katniss and Prim's scene. Peeta looking pristine. His skin glowing. "Like it could just wipe away all the hurt on the inside. He doesn't know, or maybe he does

know, and chooses to ignore it, but going through the Games...killing all of those kids just so you can live... Peeta was right when he said it costs you everything you are."

Peeta's tearful apology to the girl he killed out of mercy from District Eight began. "My God," he choked out. "Shhh. Shhh." He lifted her head and placed it in his lap. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He stroked her hair. He gulped as he told her, "I'll make it quick. You won't suffer anymore." The girl's eyes met his. They were full of tears. "Close your eyes." His voice was soft and tender. "You're going home now. You're going to be with your family. They're waiting for you." He watched as she closed her eyes. Peeta held the knife in his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry." He slit her throat all the while visibly swallowing back his tears. He placed her head gently down to the ground as the Gamemakers' cannon fired.

"Doing that sort of thing..." Katniss' voice spoke, but the scene of Peeta leaning over the girl they all knew as Foxface was on screen. "...it makes a mark you can't erase. You can't put makeup on it and shine it up. It's still there, and it hurts."

Peeta's voice cracked out, "I'm sorry," to the redheaded girl that lay dead in the arena.

"Does he think I'm an idiot? Is Snow under the impression that showing me a prerecorded interview of Peeta all dressed up, means I'm going to believe he's fine? That the people of this country are going to fall for his smoke and mirrors?" Pictures flashed of Peeta in clothing obviously provided by the Capitol, before and after the Games, as Katniss spoke in the background, "We're smarter than he gives us credit for. The people of the districts...they'll see through the words Peeta said. They'll look past the body polish...the makeup and they'll see the man that would do or say anything to save my life."

The scene turned back to Katniss as she wiped the lipstick she was wearing off on the hem of her mockingjay uniform. "We can't hide who we really are no matter how much crap they put on us. Snow can try and make me...all of us believe that Peeta's some traitor, but we know better."

Scenes of Katniss walking through the hospital in District Eight began to play. An older man with a bloody bandage wrapped around his forehead held Katniss' hand and spoke to her. "Peeta's outsmarting his enemies again, huh," his creased and filthy face lit up with pride.

A badly injured woman reaching out to her saying, "We know Peeta only said those things to protect his wife and child."

A young President Snow's face bled onto the screen, standing at a podium over chariots with tributes representing each nation, then quickly changed to show him aging over the years, taking the same position as the tributes in the chariots continued to change with each year. Katniss' voice spoke in the background, "If Snow were as brave and powerful as he wanted us all to believe, he'd quit hiding Peeta. Instead of putting an interview on from weeks ago, he'd do a live one so I could see what my husband really looks like, only he won't because it will show the people of this nation exactly the kind of man he is. He's a coward."

An image of Peeta and Katniss holding the nightlock up for all the world to see took over the screen. "Afraid of two kids that did nothing but fall in love and challenged the Capitol for their right to live," Katniss' voice spoke as the screen dissolved to her clinging onto Peeta's back saying, "Read my lips," and mouthing "I love you."

Peeta's interview with Caesar quickly appeared, "Katniss... I don't know where you are or what your role is in all of this, but..." he hung his head down then lifted it up, "Read my lips. You know what you

have to do." It switched to slow motion. Peeta's lips barely moved, but no sound came out. Then the screen faded to black and bright white letters appeared out of nowhere, ***OUR JABBERJAY'S SILENCE SPEAKS VOLUMES!*** The music faded. The spot was complete.

"Katniss was brilliant," Effie held back her sobs at seeing her darling girl. "As were you, Peeta."

"Hot damn," Johanna leaned against the wall as Mr. Tanner restarted the elevator. "That was pretty good." She gave Peeta a little thump. "What'd ya think, cinnamon buns?"

Peeta kept swallowing over and over again, his eyes filling with tears as he looked to Effie and choked out, "Wife and child?"

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 10: Home, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Nine: Home

Previously a propos was viewed by our little band of rebels in the Capitol, however with Peeta's memory loss, hearing he was married and expecting a baby came as a surprise to him. Katniss had discovered a section of Thirteen that was blocked off, and Effie had a plan to get Peeta to safety.

Sorry for the delay with this chapter but it was a HUGE one for me. There's a song in here, no I did not write it, but I did alter it for the sake of the story. The name of the song...The Story. There was a particular version of it that I listened to while writing this chapter, and I encourage you to listen (Posted on my tumblr page) while reading the K/P portion of this. The end of this chapter was bugging me for awhile...I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, then inspiration struck and I let myself write without thinking (Kind of like Peeta told Katniss to do in my story) I should follow my own advice more often. I hope you enjoy this chapter. It was a brutal one for me and it is exceptionally long. Maybe too long. I really need to stop doing that. I had a lot to say, I just hope you don't mind listening. Thank you for your reviews, but most of all for reading.

Thank you so much S and A for all of your dedication and work. Seriously...I sent this chapter to them more than once. I am so not worthy!

If you want to keep up to date with what's going on...where I am with a chapter...the way my brain works, please follow me on tumblr. [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com).

The moment you've been waiting for has finally arrived in...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Johanna looked around the posh Capitol quarters. "Where the hell are we?"

"Shut it, Mason," the Peacekeeper ordered as they entered the residency of Effie Trinket. "Move," he spoke forcefully to Portia, Johanna and Peeta. "Sit."

"Should I roll over and beg too?" Johanna asked sarcastically as she plopped down on the sofa next to the rest of her rebel friends.

"Please, keep your comments to yourself, Johanna," Effie gave her a curt look of warning.

"Checking residency," Mr. Tanner spoke into the band on his wrist, pulled out Effie's computer from beneath his vest and lifted his finger to cover his lips, telling the group to stay silent as he walked from room to room holding the computer out, scanning them. "All clear," he spoke into his wrist. "There are guards posted at ten feet intervals surrounding your quarters, Miss. Trinket, so no funny stuff," he glared at Johanna. There was dead silence in the room, no one moved a muscle. "I said the room is all clear. Go ahead and do...whatever it is you people do." He took his stance next to a large window.

"What does all clear mean, Mr. Tanner?" Effie asked.

"I scanned your room for hidden surveillance. There is none."

"How the hell'd ya know that?" Johanna stood up and walked to the table laden with food, looking it over as if it were unreal.

"That computer of Miss. Trinket's," he answered without giving away too much information.

Effie gave him a curious stare. "My computer has that capability?"

"Yes."

Peeta pierced the man with his narrow glare, "Are you a rebel or something?"

Steven glared back, "No."

"Then what the hell are you, because you're not like any Peacekeeper I've ever met." Johanna ran her fingers over a bump on her freshly shaved head. "They're not very..." she did an impression of her old escort Bitsy, "...*well mannered*." She grabbed a plate and thought, 'To hell with it. I'm eating.' She took notice of the lack of utensils and paper products that were set out. There was nothing to use as a weapon. "Well?" she asked with a mouthful of bread. "You gonna answer or what?" She directed the question to the Peacekeeper.

"Effie," Portia said with a tremble in her voice that had never been there before. "Why are we here?"

"Why don't you all make up a plate of something to eat? Nothing too rich. I don't want you getting ill." Effie offered, "I'm making tea if anyone wants a cup."

"I want some answers," Johanna piled some more food onto a plate and placed some thin slices of beef next to it. "Why the hell are we here and who the hell is this guy?" She thumbed towards Steven.

"President Snow hasn't had the success he'd been hoping for questioning all of you individually, so he thought getting you together...providing you with a sense of, 'false security,' he called it, would enable you to be free with information regarding the rebellion," Effie explained. "He's expecting me to go back with some sort of

information," Effie pondered. "I'll have to make something up." She paused, "Portia, you are to prep Peeta for his upcoming interview with Caesar and Johanna you're here because..." Effie faltered.

"I'm here so Snow can keep Peeta in line during his little talk with Flickerman," Johanna put her plate on the table and held her still cuffed hands up to the guard. "Hey Hagar, what do you say you set me free?"

"What do you say, I don't," he replied.

Johanna pierced him with an evil glare. "Okay, that explains why the three of us are here. Now explain tall, dark and dirt bag over here."

"Please," Effie stepped between Steven and Johanna who were glaring at one another until Johanna took a seat. "Johanna, he's my personal guard, and to answer your question Peeta, Mr. Tanner is not a rebel. He is here to protect me...to help me."

"Even if that means he might get caught and tortured?" Peeta asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Steven answered. "That might be hard for those of you that would sell your soul for a piece of bread, but yes, I am willing to do what I must to ensure her safety."

"Sell your soul for a piece of bread?" Johanna jumped up from her spot and got in his face. "Look who's talking. You might be able to fool some people, but I know where you're from. I know you're not Capitol born. You're from Two. *Bred* to sell your soul to the people of the Capitol so you won't have to work in the quarries."

Steven lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin. "Man, it would've been fun if I had been in the arena with you. There's no way you would've gotten out alive."

"You think you could've taken me?" Johanna stood toe to toe with the man. "Keep dreaming."

"Enough," Effie barked. "You two aren't helping by bickering back and forth with one another." She turned to Portia who hadn't moved from her spot on the sofa. "Portia?" Effie paused and took note of how thin she had gotten. The blank look in her eyes which were no longer accentuated with false lashes. The gold hair that no longer held its sparkle and had grown in brown at the roots. "Dear," Effie bent in front of her and took her hands in hers, "What have they been doing to you?"

She shook her head a bit, "Nothing I can't handle.." Her eyes finally met Effie's. "You said I'm supposed to prepare Peeta for an interview?" She made to stand, "I should get my things together."

"Sit dear," Effie patted her hand. "Your trade tools have been brought here, but first you must eat darling."

"I don't think I can," Portia said quietly. "It's been awhile since I've been able to eat anything more than a few bites. They..." her voice caught in her throat, "...they don't feed me very often anymore."

"Portia," Peeta's voice was tender as he reached out to her. "You need your strength. I can take care of myself...shower...hair...I know how to groom myself. Effie's right, you've got to eat."

"What are they doing to you, Peeta?" Portia squeezed her hand around his. "You look so beaten...worn."

His eyes darted around the room. "Effie says they're drugging me, but I don't know what's happening anymore."

"I'm being used as a human tea bag if anyone's interested," Johanna said sarcastically.

"Oh my," Effie's fingers went to her throat. "I fear we're not doing very well considering we're the rebel's last hope in the Capitol."

"Who said we were their last hope?" Johanna said completely unaffected by Peeta and Portia's morose mood. "You think we don't have more people here?"

"There's more?" Steven stepped forward. "Look Miss. Trinket, I agreed to help get you and Peeta out of here, but I cannot approve of rebel's planning the downfall of the Capitol while in my presence. Other than you, my loyalties lie with the Capitol, helping the rebels take it over wasn't part of our deal."

"Then get the hell out of here," Johanna gave him a dirty look. "In fact, here's a great idea...how about dropping dead? I, myself, find that to be the perfect way for you to avoid this topic of conversation."

"Know what I always liked about you, Mason?" Mr. Tanner walked slowly up to her, "Your fight. I just wish I was the one that had gotten chosen that year you went into the arena."

"Oh, what's wrong?" Johanna made a pouty face, "Didn't have the balls to volunteer like all the rest of your idiot friends?"

"No, I volunteered, but Wondra was chosen instead."

"Wondra was a complete moron." Johanna snarled at the Peacekeeper. "Took him out on day three."

"If it had been me in the arena, you would've been the one taken out on day three," Steven glared. "In fact, you would have been lucky to make it past the initial bloodbath."

"I wasn't in the bloodbath brainless," Johanna said it like she was speaking to a dolt. "Think I was dumb enough to stick around for that shit?"

"Think I fell for that weak little girl routine? I would have gotten you before you made it ten feet past your platform," he stepped closer to her bringing them nose to nose.

"I would've buried an axe in your skull," her nostrils flared, her eyes glistened with excitement.

"You could have tried." He said as though he was enjoying his verbal sparing with her.

"I'd be happy to try right now," Johanna's lip twitched in pleasure.

"Bring it, Mason."

"Uncuff me, Hagar."

"Not that I'm not enjoying your barbaric ways of flirting, but could we please get back on track?" Effie spoke with pursed lips.

"Flirting?" Johanna spit out. "That woman's wig is too tight." She sat back down and sipped at a glass of water.

Steven resumed his stance next to the window. "I'm going to have to agree with Mason. Wouldn't waste my time on someone like her."

"Too much woman for ya?" Johanna bit into a piece of meat with gusto.

"Woman? Hah. The only thing womanly about you are those two bumps sticking out of you," he pointed to her breasts.

"That's right...you're from Two. You prefer your woman with pointy, gold tipped teeth." Johanna made a chomping motion at him.

"Mr. Tanner, if you wouldn't mind leaving the room, I would appreciate it," Effie asked politely in an attempt to break up the sparing.

"Don't think that would be too wise, Miss. Trinket. I'm not leaving you alone with these people," Steven stayed in place. "You want to talk, go ahead, but I'm not going anywhere."

"Mr. Tanner, I need to speak with them in regards to some private matters, and as you said, discussion of the rebellion's efforts was not part of our deal," Effie made her way towards him. "They won't harm me. They're my friends."

Mr. Tanner grit his teeth as he considered what he was about to do. "I don't like this, Miss. Trinket." His eyes waned towards Johanna, "And I don't trust her worth a damn."

"Because *you're* so trustworthy," Johanna rolled her eyes at the man and headed for the table full of food.

"Don't eat so much," Steven warned her. "You'll get sick to your stomach."

Johanna let her shoulders drop and said, "I'm making a plate for Portia, so mind your own business and shut the hell up."

"Please!" Effie hollered. "You two are wasting precious time." She turned back towards Steven. "All I ask is for fifteen minutes. Can you please give us that?"

He looked around at the people in the room. Portia who was accepting a plate with a slice of bread and beef on it. Peeta who looked like he didn't know where he was or what he was doing there, and Johanna full of rage. "Ten minutes. You've got ten minutes. I need to look over this computer anyway." He took a step towards Johanna who was sitting down again. "Try anything, and I'll put a bullet through your brain."

"Oooh, I'm shaking," she said with wide eyes and sarcasm dripping from her voice. "You better hurry up and get out of here Hagar before Effie loses it over your flirtatious tactics." As he walked away Johanna threw a roll at his head. "Whoops. My bad."

Steven threw one more glare in Johanna's direction and said, "I'm timing you."

The second he was gone Effie rushed to Peeta's side. "I know you have questions about the recording the rebels played, but we don't have time to address them right now. I will explain everything to you when Mr. Tanner returns."

"So you can talk about Peeta in front of that guy, but not about the rest of us?" Johanna didn't understand what the hell was going on. "What's his deal? Is that guy serious about protecting you?"

Effie gave her head a little shake, "Believe it or not, he is, however, he is far from a rebel which means we must be very careful about the things we say in his presence. He has agreed to help get me and Peeta out of the Capitol, yet he will not help any of you. That will still be left up to me." Effie turned to Johanna. "You said we have others here? Who?"

Johanna leaned closer to the group who were completely focused on her. "Know the rumor about a higher up in the Capitol?" They all

nodded, "Well, it's not a rumor. When you started that shit with Bettes, you pretty much secured our guy's cover," she said to Effie.

"I always assumed Plutarch was the higher up," Portia said quietly.

Johanna took a seat on the coffee table in front of the sofa so the group could speak more intimately. "Plutarch was never an official."

"We have an official on our side?" Effie said in surprise.

Johanna made a slight clucking noise with her tongue, "Yup."

"Does he know about my mother?" Peeta asked.

"What about her?" Johanna quirked her brow.

Effie gave Peeta's hand a pat, "He means me dear."

"Trinket your mother?" Johanna let out a burst of laughter. "Where there hell did you get the idea that she's your mother?"

Peeta's face took on a forlorn expression. "Oh yeah. You're not, are you?" He asked Effie.

"No dear," Effie took a seat right next to him. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you like a mother would love her son. Unfortunately President Snow knows how you feel about me, Peeta and he's planning on exploiting that."

"Is that why they said I was living in the capitol now?" Peeta asked. "So I'll be loyal to them?"

"Sweet mother," Johanna let out. "What the hell kind of crap are they doing to him?"

Effie lifted her fingers to her throat. "They call it hijacking. I tried to switch the drugs, but I fear I may have done more harm than good as Peeta's becoming addicted to the poison they're giving to him."

"Is that why I keep getting the shakes?" Peeta asked as he held his trembling hand out in front of him. "I can't stop them."

"Please forgive me, Peeta. I thought I was doing the right thing." Effie fought the urge to cry. "Now they're giving you the proper drugs and trying to wipe out your memories...replacing them with their own distorted version of your life, though I don't understand how."

"Son of a bitch," Johanna shook her head and ran her cuffed hands over her stubbly head. "That's why we couldn't get him to remember anything about Katniss. I knew they were drugging him, but today...Geez, he was like lump in his cell. Nothing I said was sparking any sort of recognition."

"We need to stop talking about me," Peeta didn't want to face these issues right now. He was still having a hard time with the fact that he had a wife and kid on the way which no one addressed. "We don't have much time before that guard is back."

"Peeta's right," Portia pinched a piece of beef off and placed it in her mouth. "You said something about an official, Johanna. Maybe Effie could find a way to get a message to him...talk to him...do something to help us out of here."

"I have a plan in place for that," Effie told them. "There's supposed to be a meeting with the officials soon. I've sent word to Haymitch about it, and told him about the underground railroad that leads to the jail cells."

"What the heck is an underground railroad?" Peeta asked.

"A network of tunnels that run through our nation. They were mainly focused in the south before the Dark Days, but were extended prior to the first uprising," Effie answered. "The one here in the Capitol leads from the Tribute Center to the jail, to my quarters...the president's residency... It's the answer to our prayers. I have done what I can with that computer to help Plutarch access the Capitol's broadcast network, but I know very little about it. I'm not even sure if they got my message about the meeting."

"You said Hagar was going to get you and Peeta out," Johanna leaned a little forward. "How?"

Guilt consumed Effie as she explained part of her plan to them, keeping the part about her not leaving to herself. "You must understand, I would take all of you if I could, but I can't. Even this plan with Peeta is precarious at best."

"Then why do it?" Peeta asked. "I don't want to leave the rest of you here. I...I can't do that."

"You have to," Portia rubbed his knee. "My sweet boy," she looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Don't you understand? All of us signed on for this. We're going through this so you can live. You must go if you have an opportunity to."

"Don't worry about us, Peeta," Johanna chimed in. "We'll be fine."

"Yes they will," Effie straightened her spine. "I will make sure of it."

"See?" Johanna gestured towards Effie, "She's gonna send in the rebel's army for us when she gets to Thirteen with you."

Effie cleared her throat. "I won't be going to Thirteen with him. I will be returning to the Capitol until the rebels come to break the rest of us out."

The entire group started to complain, speaking over one another until Johanna said, "Shut up." She paused. "Look, I'll admit I'm not your biggest fan Trinket, but you've got a shot to get the hell out of here...take it. You know more about the goings on in the Capitol than any of us do, so you're pretty damn important to this rebellion. Get the hell out, Effie."

Effie pursed her lips and said, "I shall leave when I can take you, Portia and Annie with me. Until then...it is of the utmost importance that Mr. Tanner believe I am leaving with Peeta or he will not help."

"Please don't do this," Peeta begged her. "I don't know if I can go without you. Those rebels don't need me anyway. They've got Katniss," he went on a slight rant. "I'm useless to them in my condition and...and...how am I supposed to face Katniss if you're not there to tell me about her? I barely know her!"

"Peeta, the one thing you must be certain of, is that you and Katniss will always find your way back together." Effie smiled softly at him. "Nothing can keep you apart, dear. Not even a war."

"I'm not crazy about you staying, but hell..." Johanna smirked, "...if you get put in jail with us, at least we'll be reminded how to eat our moldy rations with manners." The group let out a bit of pathetic laughter. "Trinket, if you do this, you're going to need some time while you're in Twelve, and that army of Snow's are going to be right behind you and that...guy," she thumbed towards the spare bedroom where Steven was, "He can only do so much. Get to Thomas Hart. He may be able to help."

"Thomas Hart?" Effie's eyes grew huge. "He's one of us?"

"The man in charge of turning prisoners into Avox is a rebel?" Portia asked in disbelief. "Why didn't I know this?"

"The same reason you didn't know about Seneca Crane," Johanna said. "Had to keep his identity a secret. If you can reach him, he may be able to do something about delaying Snow's army from going in after you get to Twelve. He's not the only one we've got in the Capitol. You know about Carter Darlington, then there's..."

"Darlington's dead," Steven said as he entered the room. "Your ten minutes are up."

"Carter's dead?" Johanna stood up. "What the hell? Did Snow find out about him?"

Effie still wasn't sure what Carter was doing in the alley the night she killed Ianthe, but she remembered the gun Carter was holding. "I believe he along with his girlfriend, were both traitors to the rebellion."

"Darlington wasn't a traitor," Mr. Tanner said as he took up his military stance next to a window. "He had to go. The Capitol was going to be asking questions about the death of their spy, and he was the easiest to blame for it so I planted a gun on the guy after stabbing him."

"What?!" Effie stood up in a huff. "You mean you killed him to place the blame on him for something...I did."

"Whoa! Hold up a minute," Johanna was on her feet too. "You mean to tell me *you* killed a rebel spy," she pointed at Effie, "and you killed Darlington to cover Trinket's ass?" Her head fell back as she let out a roar of laughter. "Good God, you two are a hell of a pair. One risking

her ass for the rebellion and this moron risking his neck for..." Johanna laughed again, "...Effie Trinket."

"Johanna," Peeta cut her short. "People are dead. I don't think we should be laughing about that."

"Big deal!" She snapped. "People die all the time. It's the world we live in. You should know better than most, Peeta." Her deranged laughter was gone and in its place anger. "Okay, so Darlington is gone. We still have others here. Two in medical, one in broadcast, none in defense, which sucks, but you can't have everything." Johanna sat back down then got up and began a somewhat frantic pace. "The point is, we're not alone."

"If I were you, I wouldn't mention any names," Mr. Tanner warned Johanna. "I didn't agree to keep rebel spies safe."

"What the hell do you call Trinket here?" Johanna spat out. "You're in just as deep as the rest of us Hagar, whether you like it or not." By the angry twitch on Steven's face, it was clear he wasn't very happy about her assessment. "Now, are you going to keep on spouting a bunch of Capitol crap or are you going to help?"

"I already agreed to get them out. We're going to Twelve, Effie will contact her...*people*," the way he said it made it sound like he was calling them dogs, "then I'll come back here and accept my punishment."

"So noble," Johanna rolled her eyes. "You're an idiot."

Steven Tanner had had enough of her verbal insults, "I'm the idiot? I'm not the one in cuffs, with my head shaved and bruises covering my body."

"No you're the one that put them there!" Johanna screeched. "Look around," she waved her cuffed hands in the air, "People like *you* are the ones doing this to us. Why? Because Snow wants you to." She sauntered up to him, her voice low and full of hate, "What's it like being his little bitch? Do something for ya?"

"Steven!" Effie shouted when he pulled his gun from its holster stopping him before he blew a hole through Johanna's brain as threatened. "You two must stop this right now," Effie said in a controlled tone. "Peeta," she turned to him, "eat something so you can prepare for the interview. Portia, I want you to rest. Lie down in the spare bedroom, and get some sleep. You look exhausted dear, and Johanna...Mr. Tanner...you two...stop talking. You're giving me a headache."

"The queen has spoken," Johanna lifted her cuffed hands to Steven. "Take these off. I'm going to bed with Portia."

"Isn't going to happen, Mason."

"One. Can you take off one of them? Geez! I want to lie down, not kill you." Johanna instantly corrected herself, "No. I *do* want to kill you, but it won't do me a bit of good right now, so..." she shoved her hands about an inch away from his face, "...what's wrong, Hagar? You afraid of a little girl from Seven?"

Mr. Tanner glared at her and unlocked one of the cuffs. "I really do wish we had been in the arena together. The amount of pleasure I would've gotten from slicing you in two..." he raised his brows and gave her an evil smile.

Johanna rolled her eyes, "It's always you dolts from Two that tell me shit like that. Brutus used to tell me how he would've skewered my head on a stick if he were in the arena with me." She rubbed at the

mark on her wrist the handcuff had made. "Like my life being threatened was some sort of sick turn on."

"Brutus was an idiot," Peeta said quietly. "He thought he could be friendly with me during training, and Katniss and I would agree to be allies with him." All eyes turned towards him. "What?" Peeta looked around at his gawking audience. "Did I say something wrong?"

"You remember preparing for the Quell?" Effie asked.

Peeta sat still with his elbows on his knees. "I remember having lunch with everyone and Katniss being really pissed off at Johanna for laughing at me." He lifted his gaze to Effie. "She cared about me."

"Yes, she did...does," Portia ran her hand over his. "Katniss loves you."

Peeta leaned back against the sofa, "I think I know that, but...I'm not sure how I feel about her."

Johanna crossed the room and stood in front of him. "Yeah, well...you better figure it out before you go on air, buns or I'm toast."

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Mr. Tanner led Johanna and Portia to the spare bedroom as Peeta went into the bathroom for a hot shower. Once all his prisoners were

in secure positions he took the computer back to Effie. "Here," he handed it to her. "You'll need to input some information in here in case you get injured and can't talk to anyone."

"What sort of information?" Effie held it in her hands and looked down at the screen. "It's different than before. What did you do to it?"

"Made it a bit more secure." He took a seat next to Effie. "You'll need to use this code to get access to it now," he typed it in, showing her how to bring the computer to life. "Speak into it, and it will record whatever you want to tell it, then I'll show you how to hide the file."

"How do you know so much about computers, Mr. Tanner?" Effie wondered.

Steven let out a huge breath. "Tribute Academy. They don't just train you for the Games. Not everyone can go into the arena. They're training future Peacekeepers too. If you're happy being a regular Peacekeeper then you pretty much concentrate on the basic courses, the ones that prepare you for the arena. If you have the ability to see past that, then you take other classes too...ones that can make you a valuable commodity to the Capitol after your eighteenth birthday. I started computer courses the day I entered the academy at the age of five. I excelled in mathematics, science, computer codes...security..."

"Was there anything you didn't excel in?" Effie asked.

"Yes. Physical training." Mr. Tanner gave her a somewhat sheepish look. "I was scrawny until the age of fourteen, then something happened and I shot up...got muscles. That summer while all my classmates were taking the month off the school provided, I enrolled in their extra curricular activities. By the time my classmates got back I had grown six inches, and put on about twenty-five pounds. I was moved up in the academy pretty quickly. Taking advanced courses in

technology, and security detail. Then one day I knew more than the instructors. That's when they moved me into Two's elite training. I spent the next two years mastering hand to hand combat, computer technology, science was a thing of the past...not much use for that in their opinion, but technology...that was something they really focused on, along with the physical training of course."

Effie studied him carefully, "You're a...genius."

"Suppose you could say that." Steven got up and drank a glass of water. "My parents used to say I was born in the wrong district. I should've been born in District Three." His shoulders slumped a bit then picked back up. "My dad was smart like me when he was in the academy, but didn't have any physical stamina. My mother was the opposite...she was fierce when it came to battle, but didn't have the brains to go with it. That's how they met. My dad, who's about eight inches shorter than my mother, went up to her and offered to help her with her studies if she would help him with hand to hand combat. They both volunteered during their last reaping, but neither one was chosen, and they were both thankful in a way. Mom went to work in the quarry, dad went to work for the academy as an instructor. No one knew as much about computers as he did, so even though he didn't look the part of an ideal tribute trainer, they knew he was the man to have teaching their future Peacekeepers about technology."

Johanna's voice startled them, "How many are there like you? Smart ones? Because all the tributes I've met from Two are pretty much idiots."

"Thought you were sleeping?" He asked.

"I don't sleep." Johanna asked again, "Are there more Peacekeepers like you?"

Mr. Tanner shrugged a shoulder, "Not really. There were only a handful of others in training with me. I like to think I'm one of a kind."

"You are, Mr. Tanner," Effie said as she took the computer towards her bedroom. "If I leave the two of you alone, will you kill each other?"

"I'm good," Johanna picked at a piece of cake on the table of food.

"I'll be fine, Miss. Trinket," Steven assured her.

"Let me know if I am needed. If you'll excuse me," Effie went into her bedroom to record as much information about the events that had occurred since the uprisings began into the computer as she could.

"If you were such a great student, why didn't you get chosen to go into the arena?" Johanna asked him.

"It was between me and Wondra," Mr. Tanner watched her carefully. "See, they don't show you everything when they air the reaping for District Two. They show all the people that volunteer, but if you'll notice, it always goes straight to the calling of a volunteer's name. They edit out a lot of the selection process."

"So what do they do to choose? Whoever can throw the spear the farthest wins?" Johanna said sarcastically.

Steven let his lip twitch before stopping the smile. "Something like that. There's a panel from the school that decides who has the best chance of succeeding, then there's a broadcast director from the Capitol there to do a quick interview...look us over to make sure we're pleasing enough to the eye...appealing to the audience. Usually they narrow it down to two or three pretty quickly. Then it goes back to the instructors again, as well as the mayor. They used to vote in front of everyone, but they found that there was too much fallout if a tribute

from Two didn't do well in the Games, so now it's a secret ballot. I lost to Wondra by one vote."

"Your dad?" Johanna asked.

"Probably," Mr. Tanner shrugged. "Never asked him, but after that, his position was eliminated at the academy and my mother's hours were cut at the quarry. Within six months we had debt piling up and I knew it was time for me to take my position as a Peacekeeper."

"So you gave up your life to the Capitol because they threatened your family's livelihood, yet you stand there defending them to me...like what they did to your family is acceptable?" Johanna plopped in a chair and hung her legs over the arms. "That's screwed up, Hagar."

"Tanner. Steven Tanner," he said.

She lifted her shoulder and ran her hand over her head, "I like Hagar the horrible," she gave him a quick peek, "Hagar, suits you."

"Like Cinnamon Buns suited Peeta?" He smacked her feet off of the arm of the chair, "Sit up. If someone comes in, they'll think I'm being lenient on you."

"Yeah, because the woman talking into a computer, or sleeping in the spare bedroom won't be a dead giveaway." Johanna kicked one of her feet up in the air and dangled it over her knee. "Leave me alone. I'm tired and these ass wipes have been torturing the hell out of me for weeks. Let me have a few minutes of comfort." She rolled her head towards him, "Or will that be crossing some sort of moral line for you?"

He gave her a small smile, "I'm sort of glad I didn't have to kill you in the arena, Mason. You're good for a laugh."

"You laugh?" She closed her eyes. "That's about as rare as...as a Capitol escort turned rebel."

Mr. Tanner let out the laughter this time. "She's something of an anomaly isn't she?"

"Effie?" Johanna hemmed and hawed for a few seconds, "Yeah." She sat upright. "The thing that really freaks me out about her is how smart she is. You wouldn't think it by looking at her, but...that woman is friggin' brilliant. If it wasn't for her, none of us would've gotten out of the arena."

"That was Effie's doing?" Steven asked with shock written all over his face. "She didn't tell me that."

"She probably didn't tell you she dated that jerk Bettes to get information from him either, or that he used to beat the hell out of her."

"He what?" Steven's spine got stiff. "He hit her?" He almost wished the man was still alive so he could kill him himself.

"Not just hit...*beat*. Our guy in medical told us that he had to heal a few broken bones. Thank God she lived here and not in a district. She'd have been out of commission for weeks, not hours." Johanna leaned closer to Steven. "Tell me something...are you really protecting her because you swore you would? I mean...that's kind of a weak reason."

"Not to me," He crossed a leg over his knee. "Before I took my position in the Peacekeeper division I had to ask myself, if my parents weren't around, would I be willing to dedicate twenty years of my life to the Capitol. That's when I read the oath and realized it wasn't about the Capitol, but about me...the kind of person I wanted to be."

Someone that enforces the laws of our nation to make it a better place."

"Didn't you realize that you Peacekeepers were the biggest law breakers of them all?"

Mr. Tanner let out a small breath, "It took me awhile to accept that fact. My superiors not only overlooked poor behavior when it came to Peacekeepers, they encouraged it. That didn't sit too well with me. That's when I applied for a promotion and got it. I was bumped up a couple of times, but it was the same thing everywhere I went until I got approved for personal security detail."

"And you got stuck with Effie Trinket."

"I wouldn't say I was stuck with her, but yes," he nodded absently. "All the Peacekeepers know when we take the oath to protect someone, the job ends when the person you're protecting dies or you die. There's no retirement...no twenty year commitment. Most of these jobs only last for...well, I've known some men that have only lasted a day or two, and others that have been in position for a couple of years."

"If you know you're going to die, then why take the job?" Johanna didn't quite grasp it.

"For most it's the money, but for me...I needed to know I was doing something important with my life." He let both feet rest firmly against the floor. "The day I took the oath to protect Miss. Trinket was the day I agreed to die for her." He lifted his gaze to Johanna's curious stare. "You see, Mason...I'm one of the lucky ones. The person I'm going to die for actually cares about others. She believes in what she's doing as much as I believe in what I'm doing. Who wouldn't die for that sort

of person? Isn't that why you're so willing to die for Katniss and Peeta?"

Johanna didn't like it when people pointed out her compassionate side. "I did it so the people of this nation could live without the fear of death constantly looming overhead."

"And because you believe in Katniss and Peeta...in what they did while they were in the arena," He could see right through her.

"Whatever!" Johanna glared narrowly at him.

Steven let out a little laugh, "Your ice queen act is as good as your innocent little girl act. I'm not sure who you think you're fooling, Mason, but you respect them...believe in what they're doing, and you're willing to lay down your life for Katniss and Peeta Mellark." He got up and poured a cup of tea, sweetened it with some sugar and handed it to her. "What makes you so different from me?"

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Peeta watched carefully as the waistband was strapped to Johanna. "It is similar to the electrical jolts you received, Mr. Mellark," Snow said with a lecherous grin. "Gag her so we don't hear her screams." He turned to Peeta, "Of course she won't scream as long as you answer Caesar's questions the way you should. The rebels are using you without your approval. They're horrible people, aren't they?"

"I...I guess so," Peeta didn't think the rebels were horrible at all. Of course he was basing that on the people he was currently surrounded by. He did think Snow was horrible though. With each passing hour since Effie told him he wasn't what Snow said, Peeta had been questioning the man's motives. Why would Snow be threatening Johanna if Peeta was actually a spy for the Capitol? Wouldn't Peeta do what Snow wanted without having to be coerced into it? And why did he want Peeta to hate Katniss so much? What was the ultimate plan, because now Peeta was sure there was one. "I'll say what you want, just don't hurt her, or..." Peeta realized he may be able to work this in his favor, "...or I'll tell them what you've been doing to me. I'll let the country know what kind of person you really are."

"Mr. Mellark," Snow eyed him carefully. "Your hostility is aimed at the wrong individual. I am not the person that put you in this position. That was Katniss Everdeen."

A memory flashed through Peeta's mind.

"I love you, Katniss Mellark."

A gentle smile played upon her lips just reaching her eyes. "Katniss Mellark," she said it with a tranquil tone in her voice. "Say it again."

Peeta held his lips against hers and whispered, "Katniss Mellark."

He tried to follow it...trace the memory of Katniss saying that to him, back to an earlier part of his life, but it was time to go on air. Caesar Flickerman was introducing Peeta, who wasn't sure what he was going to say. Johanna was on the side of the stage, her safety being threatened by Snow's henchmen, and Katniss...'Katniss Mellark,' he thought to himself, 'I called her that. I kissed her...she kissed me... Was that for the Games? Was there an audience watching?'

"Peeta, any thoughts?" Caesar asked, and Peeta was grateful Effie had played the rebel's propaganda spot for him earlier or he wouldn't have known what to say to Caesar's question. He was too busy thinking about his past, or lack thereof.

"They're um..." Peeta's eyes glanced towards Snow who was only a few feet away from struggling Johanna. Would Peeta follow up on his threat to expose Snow or would he do his bidding? There was pain in his heart as he stared blankly at the red light on the camera telling himself to focus on it, and not think about the people of the nation that might be affected by his words. Johanna was who he was able to protect for now. "It's obvious that they're using old recordings of us to their advantage." There was no emotion in his voice as he said flatly, "Katniss stop letting them take advantage of us...of what we shared," Peeta still wasn't sure what that was. From somewhere in the back of his mind words came out, he wasn't sure what they meant, but he knew he had to tell her, "Don't let them change you. Don't be a pawn in their Games." Peeta's eyes almost glassed over as he said, "Those moments were for you, Katniss." He took a slight pause before adding, "The things I said...I did, weren't supposed to be used as a weapon in a war that could be instrumental in the destruction of humanity. They were for you. It's all for you." He turned to Caesar, "I'm done."

Peeta stayed seated until a Peacekeeper took his arm guiding him towards Johanna. "You should have told them the truth about Snow, Peeta," Johanna glared at him.

Snow leaned in, pressed his moist swollen lips close to her ear and said, "The rebel's weakness will be their Jabberjay's heart." He stood upright, "Miss. Trinket. Escort them back to their prison cells."

"Yes, sir," Effie walked ahead of Mr. Tanner who held his prisoners by a chain that was attached to their handcuffs. Once in the elevator she waited for Mr. Tanner's nod letting her know it was safe to speak.

"Johanna, please stop antagonizing everyone in the Capitol. We've lost too many of our friends already, and I do not want to lose you as well."

Johanna glared at Peeta, "What the hell were you thinking? Do you have any clue what the rebels are going to think of you after saying something like that? Like your first interview wasn't bad enough now they're going to think you don't want this war...you don't want..."

"She'll know," Peeta said quietly, almost to himself. "I'm not sure what I told Katniss, but...she'll understand what I said."

"You mean you were sending her some sort of message, dear?" Effie asked.

"I think so," Peeta tried to search for it. "We were in the middle of a garden...there were wind chimes everywhere and I said that to her." He lifted his eyes to Johanna, "I don't know what it meant, Johanna, but something inside of me said she'd understand."

Johanna gave her head a little nod, "Okay buns...you did good, and hey...they only gave me two jolts. Kind of woke me up a bit."

Mr. Tanner rolled his head towards her, "You *would* enjoy something like that."

"Would've liked it more if you were on the other end of the stick, Hagar," Johanna arched her brow.

"Maybe next time."

Effie sighed. "I'm sure I speak for both Peeta and myself when I say, this barbaric form of foreplay between the two of you isn't the *least* bit awkward to be privy to," she pursed her lips and gave them a look of disapproval. Peeta's shaking caught them all off guard. "What's wrong with him?" Effie took Peeta's face in her hands. "Look at me Peeta. Peeta!"

Mr. Tanner spoke into his communication band. "We've got a problem with one of the prisoners. Mellark is convulsing."

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"Where we going?" Finnick asked as he stuffed his bare feet into the slippers on the floor next to his hospital bed.

Katniss threw him a startled look. "Go back to sleep Finnick. I'm just taking a walk."

"Then we'll walk together, but you better not let those guards see you," he warned, "they'll report you to Coin."

"That's why you need to go back to bed." Katniss tightened the belt on her robe. "Please, Finnick. I can't be worrying about you too."

Finnick gave her a flirtatious smile, "Do you worry about me often, Katniss?"

She let out a little burst of laughter, "Oh, for goodness sake. Do you ever stop?"

"Only when I've left you satisfied, baby." He wagged his brows.

"You're disgusting," Katniss gave her head a little motion for him to follow her. "Keep it down. If we get busted, I'm blaming this on you."

"No problem. I'll pretend I'm walking in my sleep or something," Finnick whispered, following her quietly down the hall. "Where we going?"

Katniss really didn't want Finnick to be her shadow, but since he was there she might as well put him to good use. "You're going to do some heavy lifting for me." It took them about thirty minutes to sneak to her quarters. "They've got guards everywhere so we'll have to be careful when we leave here." Katniss wondered if they'd be able to pull this off. "Can you carry that trunk?"

Finnick lifted it up and down a few times. "It's not too heavy...more bulky than anything else. Where we taking it?"

She carefully scrutinized the other trunk wishing Finnick could carry both of them. "Let's pack the stuff from that trunk inside of this one, and then I can carry the rest in a pillowcase or something." They barely got it all in, but between the trunk and the pillowcase, Katniss had everything Peeta packed up for them from Twelve. "Just one more thing." She went to the shelf and put the spices in the pillowcase. "Okay, let's go." Since she wasn't staying in her quarters, their permanent guard hadn't been posted, but one did show up every now and then to patrol the floor. Katniss led Finnick to the area where Thirteen's hidden quarters were.

"Wow, what is this place," Finnick looked around, adjusting the cumbersome trunk in his hands.

"Don't know, but I'm trying to find out." She went into the room marked President's Quarters. "Come on," she took him into the main bedroom. "Put the trunk down there," she pointed to a spot on the floor. "I discovered this place on one of my explorations." She opened the trunk and searched through it until she found what she needed. "Here," she handed Finnick one of the uniform shirts everyone in Thirteen wore. "Rip this in half and we can both clean this place up."

Finnick gave her a dirty look, "Now I know why you didn't tell me where we were going. You wanted free labor," then winked at her.

"You caught me Odair. It's not your butt I'm after, it's your ability to dust." She pulled the piece of shirt he threw at her off of her face, "Pick a section and start cleaning."

"Why?" Finnick opened up the closet and noticed it was empty. "You planning on moving in here or something?"

"Something like that," Katniss told him. "But don't tell anyone. I don't want anyone knowing about this."

"Then why'd you show it to me?" Finnick asked as he searched through some drawers. "Hey, there's a few pieces of old clothes in here, why didn't you use those as rags?"

Katniss eyed up the clothing, "It belonged to someone else." She lifted it out of the drawers and placed it on the bare closet shelf. "I don't know why, but I think this is all that's left of them, and I didn't have it in me to just erase them."

"You think the people that lived here died?" Finnick lifted the cushion off of an armchair and began to punch the dust out of it.

"Don't know, but they've got this section blocked off for a reason." Katniss began cleaning from the top down, dusting the walls, the doors of the closet, the dresser, working up a sweat and feeling the muscles in her stomach start to burn. "Damn, I never used to get this worn out. What are you doing to me banana nut?" She ran her hand over her belly and blew out a breath.

"Katniss?" Finnick gave her a strange look. "You talking to yourself?"

"Yeah," she gave her neck a roll and felt a few pops. "Didn't you know, I walk around talking to my missing husband all the time."

"No, I knew that, but you normally don't make any sound when you do that," Finnick lifted up the mattress and flipped it over, a huge puff of dust billowed in the air as he choked on it. "Remind me why I'm helping you with this again?"

"Because you're losing your mind in that hospital room." She pulled out some bedding and threw it to Finnick. "Help me with this." The sheets were too large, so Finnick lifted the mattress up while Katniss pulled the linens tightly underneath.

"These are the sheets from Victor's Village, aren't they?" Finnick asked as he rubbed a pillowcase between his fingertips.

"Yup," Katniss stuffed a pillow into a case. "You going to be useful or rub your hands on my sheets all night long? Who knows where they've been." She tossed a bare pillow at his head. She chuckled then said, "Peeta packed all this stuff away for me while we were getting ready for the Quell. He was hoping we'd be able to use it if we got out alive."

Finnick helped her in silence as they finished setting things out. "Wow," he said as he opened the leather binding that held the sketch Peeta drew for her.

"Hey!" Katniss snatched it out of his hand and slammed the binder closed. "Quit snooping!"

"Holy cow, Katniss," Finnick's face read shock. "I'm seeing you in a completely different light now. All of you." The scowl Katniss threw in his direction had Finnick ducking down his head and holding up his hands in defense of himself. "I'm not the one that sketched you and Peeta half naked in bed. Don't get mad at me."

"Shut up, Finnick." Katniss shoved the binder into an empty drawer.

"What's this?" Finnick looked over a palm sized piece of equipment. "Some type of hair curler...does it shave your legs? It's got to do something to improve your looks. God knows you need all the help you can get," he laughed as he tossed the fetal monitor to her.

"Hey, be careful!" She caught it and clutched it to her chest. "This is one of a kind." She placed it in the drawer next to the leather binder. "You're worse than a kid."

"I do have a certain little boy quality that endears me to the hearts of women all over the nation, don't I?" Finnick gave her an innocent look that had Katniss laughing.

"Yeah, you're spoiled rotten."

Finnick strolled around the room, touching a few things here and there, "I sleep in the hospital ward of Thirteen, wear scratchy nightgowns and eat barely enough hot grain to stop my stomach from rumbling for breakfast while you're setting up a mini victor's mansion,

and have more food in one meal than I have all day." He gave her a curious stare, "Who's spoiled?"

"Peeta packed these things for me." She said in defense. "I wouldn't even use them if it weren't for him." Katniss felt the anger...guilt growing inside of her. "I need to make this place like home so when he gets back..." she sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. Finnick's comment about how much food she was given each day struck a nerve. "They're starving him. I probably ate more during breakfast than he's eaten in the past few weeks." The fury she felt inside towards Snow was overwhelming. "I said I wouldn't go on the rescue mission to get him from the Capitol, but I want to Finnick. I want to go there and kill Snow. Put an end to this whole war."

Finnick took a seat on the chair. "You could kill Snow now, but there's no point unless we've got control of the districts otherwise there'll be another Snow popping up in a matter of seconds."

"Yeah, and her name is Coin," Katniss spit out. "I can't stand that woman."

"I kind of got that impression from that meeting before you went to Eight." Finnick's leg was moving of its own accord in an up and down motion. "Is it because of what she said during that meeting in the dining hall?"

Katniss leaned back on her hands, "Did you know we have an escape route in Twelve. There's a way to get from Victor's Village into the woods without being detected."

Finnick gave her a slow nod. "Johanna and I wondered why you and Peeta didn't get out of Twelve before the Games."

"She didn't want us to." Katniss told him. "Coin wanted me and Peeta to be rescued from the arena so she could show Snow how powerful she was." Katniss turned her whole body towards Finnick, "She put all of your lives at risk just so our rescue could be on television."

Finnick contemplated for a moment then said, "The way I see it, if you two hadn't been rescued from the arena, Johanna, Beetee and I would've had to kill each other to survive, and I'm pretty sure it would've been me crowned victor," he said it with a sorrow filled voice.

"It's like they designed that arena especially for you, huh?" Katniss asked. "Kind of makes you wonder if they had already planned on you being in the arena when it was built. I mean...how do we know Snow hadn't been planning that Quell for years? Then me and Peeta come along and..." she lifted her hands in the air, "...voila. The answer to his prayers. The perfect way to get rid of us without anyone questioning it."

Finnick's playfulness was long gone and in its place was the forlorn patient that had yet to be released from the hospital. "It consumes my every thought when I let my mind travel to the arena." There was silence until Finnick whispered, "The jabberjays."

Katniss swallowed the lump in her throat. "His heart stopping," she added as an image of Peeta laying dead in the arena flashed through her mind.

"Up until that moment I didn't know if you two were for real or not. I actually thought Peeta made up that whole bit about you two being married and having a baby." Katniss appreciated the fact that Finnick didn't avoid mentioning the baby like everyone else did in normal conversation. "When Peeta died out there..." Finnick looked up at her with sorrow written all over his face, "I knew. You two never pretended. You really did get married...you really were pregnant."

"Yes," Katniss said softly. "And now he's gone." She turned to Finnick for help. "How do you do it, Finnick? How do you deal with this?"

"I don't, Katniss," He got up and took a spot next to her on the edge of the bed, his voice on the edge of hysterics. "I can't sleep, and when I do, I wake up from horrible nightmares of what might be happening to Annie out there. You think daylight would bring some form of relief...no more nightmares plaguing your every thought...something. You wake up thinking, maybe today will be the day they go into the Capitol and rescue them, but it's not, and they just keep postponing it." Finnick was on the verge of tears. "I should have warned you somehow. Should have told you and Peeta what they were planning on doing in the arena...what they were planning on doing once you were *out* of the arena." He buried his face in his hands and began to quietly sob. "I should have killed you and Peeta so you'd never have to go through this."

Katniss placed her hand on his trembling shoulder in understanding. After seeing the condition Peeta was in tonight, she didn't even want to imagine the hell he was going through. Death seemed like the best option. "Sometimes I wish we were all dead," she agreed with him. "They're going to assume the worst of him again after the things he said. If I didn't know him, I'd assume he was against the rebellion." Katniss worried not only about Peeta's quickly deteriorating appearance, but his safety when he did get to Thirteen. "Think Coin will keep her word about pardoning him?"

"I don't know, Katniss. I don't know what's going to happen if they ever get here."

They sat quietly for a little while, both of them feeling sorry for themselves, for the ones they loved. Katniss didn't know what time it was, but she knew they had stayed way too long. It was time to get

back to the hospital. "Let's go, Finnick." They quietly made their way back into Finnick's room right before their breakfast was served. Katniss stared at the food on her plate, her appetite completely gone, and scraped some of it onto Finnick's. "Here. I'm not hungry." She ate a few bites of toast after drinking the tea her mother sent with every meal, knowing proper nourishment was a necessity, but actually stomaching the food was another story. In the back of her mind she could see Peeta's thin face, his hollowed out cheekbones, the way the clothes hung off of his shoulders. She could hear the lack of emotion in his voice when he said, 'Don't be a pawn in their Games... It's all for you, Katniss.' "Oh my God," her hand clapped over her mouth. Peeta had sent her a message after all.

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"Where are we going?" Peeta walked alongside of Effie towards an area he wasn't familiar with.

"We're going to District Twelve," Effie had dressed for the occasion wearing sturdy pants, and a matching jacket, boots with a flat heel that supported her ankles, and her hair in a tight bun at the base of her neck.

"You look different today, Miss. Trinket." Mr. Tanner led them to the small hovercraft.

Effie held her head up high, "I will be walking amongst the remains of District Twelve's residents. I don't believe that's the place for high heels and a wig."

"Mom?" Peeta felt strange calling her that. "Effie?" That felt a little more normal. "What if I don't want to go?" He could feel a horrible sensation in his gut forming when he thought about her plan to get him rescued.

"We have no choice," She motioned for him to take a seat on President Snow's private hovercraft. "There are some things you must see for yourself, and a recording simply will not suffice."

"All secure pilot," Mr. Tanner took his spot next to Peeta. "It's going to be a couple of hours before we're there, you two might as well relax."

"Get some rest, Peeta," Effie ordered gently before she closed her eyes in an attempt to get some sleep. Talking on board the hovercraft with the pilot, and the listening devices that were surely planted, was not a good idea. "Go on now," she urged him. "Close your eyes and we'll be there before we know it."

It had been a very long night for Effie Trinket. The lack of jacker juice in Peeta's system caused him to go through severe withdrawal. He was fine now, but once he was out of the Capitol, she worried that he'd die from it. After returning to her quarters with Mr. Tanner she argued with him about returning to medical to retrieve some to take to Thirteen. She had finally given up fighting with him when he excused himself to take his short break. Effie had no clue how she could slip past the Peacekeeper he left to guard her, this one hadn't fallen for her offer of food or drink. He was a Capitol guard. Effie's frustrations grew when the man insisted that he stand directly outside of her bedroom door while she was in it. Mr. Tanner made sure she wouldn't be able to escape that evening. As she paced around her room she

began working out a plan in her head to try and manipulate another date with the repulsive doctor in charge of administering Peeta's tracker jacker venom when a soft knock interrupted her. "Mr. Tanner. You're back early."

"I've dismissed your other guard." He made his way past her into her bedroom without asking, pulled out the computer, pushing several buttons, and the wall slid to the side exposing the tunnels. "Come on," he led her through. "We need to hurry." Effie followed him without hesitation in the opposite direction they had gone in before. "Here, hold this," he handed her the computer and lifted up a box placed in the hall. "Put that on top of this," he ordered Effie.

"What are we..."

"Miss. Trinket, don't ask questions. Just follow my orders, okay?"

"Yes. Alright," Effie could tell by his tone she wasn't to argue.

"This way." Effie carried a small box while Mr. Tanner carried a larger one with the computer on top of it. "Wait," he said harshly as the sound of boots traveled overhead. Effie held her breath, waiting for their discovery. "Okay," he whispered. "Let's go." He stopped at a doorway, examined the television monitor next to it and set the box down. He picked up the computer, his fingers flying over the screen and the doorway opened up. "Do not say a thing," he whispered, shoving the computer into his vest.

The sight of the president's hovercraft caused Effie's insides to quake. Mr. Tanner had found a way into the hangar. He released a latch and slid his box into the compartment, hiding it beneath a parachute, then did the same with Effie's box. Closing the door to the compartment, he led Effie around the side of the craft and opened up a door revealing a computer panel. He motioned with his finger for her to watch him as

he pushed several buttons and swiped his finger across the screen. He pointed to another craft, then to Effie as if telling her she needed to do the same to one of the other hovercrafts. Effie nodded her head and followed the same pattern on the computer panel as Mr. Tanner while he worked on two other machines. When they were done he gestured with his head for them to head back to the doorway, and Effie ran as fast as her bare feet could take her. Once back in her room, he sealed off the escape route. "What was in those boxes?" Effie asked him afraid to raise her voice above a whisper.

"Everything you'll need for Peeta once you get him into the hands of the rebels."

Effie's whole face brightened. "You mean...you got the jacker juice?"

"The jacker juice, the actual venom, and anything else they had locked away with it," He sat on a chair and let out a huge sigh. Mr. Tanner had spent his break, pilfering the medical supply room. Effie didn't know how he got through the security that kept it protected, but after seeing what he was capable of, she didn't question it.

"And what did we do to the hovercrafts when we tinkered with their computers?"

"We fixed it so they would only have enough power to search for you and Peeta for maybe...an hour."

Effie's eyes opened wide. "How on earth did we do that?"

"It's electrical. It shows that the crafts are fully charged, but will use twice as much energy while in use," Mr. Tanner explained. "They'll have enough power to go to and from the Capitol and that's about it."

Effie thought for a moment then asked, "Can't they simply stop in another district and...refuel or...whatever it is that they do?"

He shook his head. "The districts don't have these types of hovercrafts. They have hoverplanes. Two different systems all together, and the hoverplanes are made for attack. They could search for you and Peeta, but they'd never be able to capture you." He gave her a glance, "One man planes. No room for passengers."

"Mr. Tanner, I'm not sure how to thank you," Effie felt a horrible pang of guilt for using him.

"Get out alive. That's all I ask." He hung his head down, gave his leg a little pound with his fist and said, "Miss. Trinket, I can't keep doing this. It's really making me question my loyalty."

"Oh pish posh," Effie waved a hand at him as she poured him a glass of water and handed it to him. "Give me one good reason you should be loyal to the Capitol."

"I'm not talking about the Capitol, I'm talking about..." he let out a frustrated breath of air, "...I'm talking about myself. My own personal morals have been put to the test since meeting you, Miss. Trinket, and as much as I like you personally, I can't let you compromise them."

"Yes," Effie remembered going through something similar when she watched Katniss and Peeta during their first Games. "Everything you've ever believed in is suddenly coming into question, isn't it?" She noticed Mr. Tanner's reluctant nod. "I'm afraid it doesn't get any easier with the exception of one thing...eventually you realize what's right and what's wrong, and you come to terms with that. You realize that everyone deserves the right to live their life the way they want, and not as servants...as slaves. That children should never be put to death as punishment for something that happened over seventy-five years

ago." She placed her hand on his, "Mr. Tanner, when you said you would have enjoyed being in the arena with Miss. Mason, did you mean that? Knowing that you'd have to kill her, do you think you'd actually enjoy that?"

"No," he said quietly. "I've never enjoyed killing people. It's something they trained me to do...something I've done...can do without blinking an eye, but I never really developed the taste for blood."

"That's because you're an intellectual, Mr. Tanner. You like to use your brain, not your brawn." Effie said. "Imagine if the Games were one of intellect, and death weren't involved. Then would you enjoy taking on Johanna?"

He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin. "Yeah. I'd kick her as..." He lifted his eyes to Effie's. "Pardon me. I shouldn't be talking like that in front of a lady such as yourself."

Effie couldn't be more pleased with his manners. "You can say derriere in front of me. I've even been known to use the word...ass," she let out a light laugh.

"I've never met anyone like you before, Miss. Trinket."

"Nor I, you, Mr. Tanner." Effie patted his arm as she stood. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get some rest."

"Can't do that Miss. Trinket," Steven took a gun out of his boot. "It's time to start your training." Effie spent the rest of the night learning about the different weapons he carried as a Peacekeeper, how to use them, and how to disarm one of the deadly guards. About two hours into Effie's training, he allowed her a small break, locked the computer so no one could get access to it, but the two of them, and then continued her crash course in fighting until his communication band

went off ordering her to prepare for her trip to Twelve. "If something happens to me while we're there, you know where Peeta's supplies are, and how to use my guns. Whatever you do, make sure you two get as far away as possible, Miss. Trinket. If the rebels can't get to you right away, find a hiding spot...something... Do not let them capture you alive." He handed her a set of keys to unlock the wrist bands he would be putting on her and Peeta once they landed. "Even if they capture Peeta, he'll be all right. They'll keep him alive as long as they can use him against the rebels, but you..."

Effie understood what he was saying loud and clear. "They'll torture me...kill me if I'm lucky, but I must admit...I fear for your safety, Mr. Tanner."

"I'm not planning on letting them capture me alive, Miss. Trinket."

As the hovercraft landed in the center of Victor's Village, Mr. Tanner confirmed with the rest of their armed escorts flying overhead that they would be moving out of District Twelve's airspace to keep from being detected by rebel flyers. "Location trackers in place," Mr. Tanner said as he snapped bracelets on Effie and Peeta. "Communication bands are a go," he strapped bands around Peeta and Effie's wrists. "HP Two Zero, do you have a location on our cargo?"

"Affirmative, HP One. Their positions are being tracked. HP Two Zero departing Twelve's airspace."

"HP Two One departing Twelve's airspace," another pilot spoke.

"HP Two Two, departing Twelve's airspace. HP One you're on your own."

"Copy," Mr. Tanner spoke into his wristband, and gave the pilot of the plane a quick glance as he led them all outside, away from the

hovercraft's surveillance system. "Rahbar," he spoke to the pilot, "I'll need to do a quick check of our surroundings while you keep watch over the prisoner."

"Sure thing, Tanner," the pilot answered.

"This prisoner has been dosed with tracker jacker venom and is highly volatile. You'll want to keep close tabs on him, make sure he doesn't start to jerk or convulse. Prisoner also has some medical problems, and President Snow won't be too happy if he's not returned in pristine condition." Mr. Tanner gave Peeta a deadly stare for good measure. "He doesn't do so well with Capitol residents, so make sure you keep your distance, but be careful, he killed three Peacekeepers while in their care last week. Remember, he's a well trained victor." Mr. Tanner adjusted his belt. "I'll be heading out Miss. Trinket." Mr. Tanner was impressed with the growl that came from Peeta right before he said, "Good luck, Rahbar."

"Hey Tanner, you seem to have a good rapport with them. I can do the scan of our surroundings so Mellark doesn't hurt Miss. Trinket." There was a hint of concern in the pilot's voice. No one wanted to be responsible for Peeta's well-being while he was in Twelve.

"Are you sure? I don't mind walking around..."

"No. No, I insist. Wouldn't want the president's assistant to get injured or anything, and he seems to respond well to you. I'll be back." The pilot went on his way, a scanning device in front of him, looking for signs of life.

Once out of sight, Mr. Tanner opened the door in the hovercraft and removed the boxes. "Where can we hide these?"

"Sixth house has no surveillance," Effie pointed it out to him. "There's a key hidden under the green and purple frog out back," Effie told him. "We should hurry Mr. Tanner." Effie closed up the back of the hovercraft, and took the computer Mr. Tanner pulled out of hiding from his vest. She waited until Mr. Tanner walked a few yards away then pressed her palm against it, and took Peeta's hand, pressing it against the computer's screen and touching a series of buttons as rapidly as she could. "You can unlock this computer now. Once you're in Thirteen, tell Plutarch to go to sponsor gifts and pull up lamb stew."

Peeta nodded his head. "Effie please come with me today. Please."

"Peeta, if I do not return to the Capitol, they will surely take your disappearance out on Johanna and Annie. I cannot allow that," she tapped on some buttons on the computer's screen and shoved it inside of Peeta's shirt, tucking it into his waistband. "Don't contact anyone in Thirteen while the Capitol crafts are here for I fear that they will pick up the transmission. Once we're gone, you will swirl your finger counterclockwise on the tiny icon in the left hand corner of the screen, that will open up a line for you to talk to Plutarch and Haymitch. They won't be able to speak to you, but they should hear your message, and come to get you. By my calculations, Thirteen is less than an hour away via hovercraft, but they may wait a day or two to come and get you to make sure it's safe." Effie gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I love you my darling boy, now it's time to go." She unclasped the bands around his wrist with the key Mr. Tanner had given her earlier in the day. "Whatever you do, don't look back, Peeta. Katniss and your baby are waiting for you."

"Come on," Steven called to them from the side of the house. "Move."

"Let's go," Effie held onto his bands and shoved them in her pocket.

Peeta raced towards the mansion Effie had told him about, and located the key under the frog she had described. "I've got it," he held it up to Mr. Tanner. "We should put those boxes in the basement." He fumbled the key and said, "Here, you do it. I can't maneuver my fingers very well anymore. Nerve damage from the arena," Peeta lied in order to take possession of the boxes.

"Take these." Mr. Tanner handed him the boxes, and unlocked the door. "Where's the basement?"

"This way," Peeta led him downstairs while Effie stood guard by an upstairs window. The house looked very familiar to Peeta, yet something about it seemed cold and unwelcoming. "Lift that lid for me, will you?" He gestured to the workbench built into the wall.

"Mr.. Tanner!" Effie called from her watch upstairs. "I think the pilot is coming back!"

"Damn," Mr. Tanner rushed to check out what Effie saw while standing guard. "Where is he?"

"I could've sworn he was right there," Effie pointed out the window.

"We've got to hurry." Steven turned and called down the stairs, "Come on, Mellark." There was no response. "Peeta," his whole face turned to panic as he raced back down the steps. "Where the hell..." He took two steps at a time as he headed back up to Effie. "Where is he?"

"Gone," Effie held out his communication and tracking bands, dropping them into Mr. tanner's open palm. "He's safe now." Effie walked as though she were being held prisoner by her Peacekeeper, towards the hovercraft. "Mr. Tanner, I do hope you will forgive me for deceiving you, but I could not allow the rest of my friends to suffer while I had my freedom." Effie stood strong, and dropped the keys she

had used to unlock Peeta to the ground. She bent to pick them up, punched him in his groin, pulled the gun from Mr. Tanner's boot, the way he had taught her during their training session the night before and shot him in the shoulder, narrowly missing his chest. She leaned over his collapsed body, pulled his other weapon away before he could reach for it and spoke gently to him, "It's your own fault for teaching me so well, Mr. Tanner. The only way I could think to keep you alive was to *endanger* your life." She pulled his helmet off and stroked his hair back from his forehead. "I shall never forgive you, if you die on me."

"FREEZE!" The sound of the missing pilot's voice had Effie lifting her hands in surrender.

Effie's time as a rebel spy was up. Her future was now in the hands of Haymitch and a promise he made as he boarded a hovercraft out of the Capitol. 'My vile little man,' she thought to herself, 'I did my best to stay alive, however, our boy's life is worth so much more than mine ever was or will be.' Effie Trinket was led back to the Capitol in cuffs, her chin held high, barely any makeup on her face, no wig, flat boots, and the pride of a rebel soldier written all over her face.

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Peeta listened to the voice of the woman he loved like a mother calling to her private Peacekeeper, signaling it was time for him to make his

escape, and said a silent, "I love you, mom," then pushed the buttons inside of the workbench that uncovered the hidden passage into the woods. Once he was secured inside he jogged slowly down the dirt tunnel with the boxes in hand, his head bent so he wouldn't hit it on the dirt ceiling, slowing his footsteps when he felt the ground slightly shake. He stopped completely, waiting out the hovercrafts flying close overhead, no doubt in search of him, and collapsed to the ground. He was free. He was free and Effie, Johanna, Portia and Annie were still in the hands of Snow. Peeta fought the urge to return to Victor's Village telling himself that Effie would have sacrificed herself for nothing if he wound up back in Snow's mercy. The pain that shot through him, took his breath away. He was sitting below ground. Above him the remains of his family's bakery, his brothers, his real mother and his father. Peeta let the tears fall freely as morbidity consumed him. He waited for hours in that spot, his prosthetic giving off the sensation that it was asleep, his real leg *actually* asleep, before taking out the computer, placing his palm against it and unlocking it. He stared at the different options on the screen trying to recall what Effie had instructed him to do and swirled his finger over one of the buttons. A screen appeared with a list of names. Peeta read them carefully, and recognized a few of them as sponsors. "That's not right," he mumbled to himself as he pressed the back button and noticed a flashing icon. He pondered for a moment before finally deciding to touch it. His screen came to life. People were speaking, walking through a wooded area next to a lake. 'Is this another one of those propaganda spots?' He wondered. 'If it is they did a terrible job editing it. You can hear everybody talking.' He tried to make out one of the male voices he heard, it was very familiar, but the camera never panned towards the guy. He listened as the girl in the tiny group began to speak about him, and her father. "Who are you?" He asked quietly, "And why are you talking about me like that?" She looked very familiar to Peeta, but after his dose of jacker juice they gave him that

morning so he wouldn't go through another episode of withdrawal, everything was hazy. 'Not everything,' he reminded himself, 'You remembered how to access that tunnel.' But the Capitol didn't know about the escape route, and Effie had told him the aspects of his life the Capitol had no knowledge of would most likely stay intact. She had also told him that they would be wiping his memory completely with his next dose of tracker jacker venom. Peeta chuckled when the girl on the computer screen called some people insects. He wished he could see what she was seeing so he could put a picture to what she had described. Then she did something...something that took his breath away. She stood up and sang. Her voice was clear yet full of emotion. 'Pain,' Peeta thought as he listened to her, 'She sounds like she's suffering.' He stared at her long dark hair, the way she held onto something around her neck, and felt his heart beat grow faster and faster. He licked his dry lips, and was sucked into her world. With each verse she sang Peeta felt himself falling deeper and deeper into a heap of emotional turmoil.

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"Did they say anything to you?" Katniss shook her head no. Finnick asked her as they sat hidden in the woods, away from their communication cuffs and tracking devices. "Not even Gale mentioned Peeta's interview?"

"No. Nothing," Katniss wasn't very thrilled that no one said a word to her about Peeta's television appearance during her time with Plutarch and his staff.

"What about Haymitch?" Finnick asked.

That one really got on Katniss' last nerve. "No," she snapped. "But I haven't seen him either, so..." still she was really pissed off that Haymitch hadn't sought her out to tell her about Peeta being on television. "We can't stay out here too long. I have to leave for Twelve in an hour."

"You're going back?" Finnick stood up and walked towards the rock they hid their devices under.

"Yeah, they think it'll make for a good propos if I show them what the Capitol did to it," Katniss knew she sounded detached, but it was the only way she could get through the day. "I've got to head down and put on my uniform."

"Were you going to do any actual hunting while we're out here?" Finnick asked.

"I didn't see anything to shoot," she shrugged.

"What about that deer?" Finnick pointed at the large buck feeding in the distance.

Katniss' eyes glistened at the sight of him, her blood began to pump, her feet moved on their own, quietly through the forest towards the animal. She stopped and took aim, releasing the arrow into the deer, taking him down in one shot. "Yes," she gave herself a quiet cheer. "Come on, Finnick, we need to make sure it's dead."

He followed her towards the animal and paused when out of nowhere she started crying. "What's wrong?" He ran to Katniss' side.

"I can't slit its throat. Damn hormones!" She screamed out, throwing the knife into the dirt. "Do it! Cut its throat so it won't suffer!" She yelled at Finnick.

"Sure, Katniss, but you may want to walk away. I remember how sick you got while we were in the arena and you killed the tree ra..." Finnick stood up from his leaning position over the deer and wondered aloud, "Why do you still have pregnancy hormones?"

"Just kill it!" She turned her tearful face to Finnick's, "Please," she begged.

Finnick stood over the deer studying Katniss for a moment, the way her emotions were out of control, the look of queasiness on her face, "Turn around Katniss. You don't want to see this." Katniss obliged while Finnick cut. "Do we have to gut him out here or can they do that in the kitchen?"

"We should really..." Katniss felt her stomach churning at the thought of gutting a deer. "No. I can't do this. We'll call my father in law. He should be able to help."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't he a baker? Does he really have any knowledge on how to gut a deer?"

"It's better than nothing! We can't let all that meat go to waste!" Katniss saw the blood dripping from the deer's throat, the stench of it attacking her senses, and made a beeline for the nearest tree.

Finnick considered doing what Peeta did in the arena for her when she got this way, then thought better of it. It wasn't his place to do

something like that for her, and knowing Katniss she'd only push him away. He waited until the sounds of her retching stopped, then walked slowly up to her. "This is an all too familiar pose you're striking, Katniss."

"Don't," Katniss held a hand up to him. "Don't say a word. Just...we can call Gale. He'll come."

"Isn't that why I'm hunting with you today? Because Gale was working in Special Defense with Beetee?" Finnick leaned against a nearby tree. Did he ask her what was going on with her or did he act like it was nothing? He honestly didn't know. The combination of anger and regret on Katniss' face told him to leave it alone. If she wanted to tell him what was going on, she would. "You said you had to leave for Twelve, right? I'll just call them on this communi..." Finnick looked at the bracelet, "...wrist...thing, and tell them you have to leave. I'm sure someone in that facility knows how to clean a deer."

Katniss nodded her tearful face at him. "Thanks." She wiped her eyes on her sleeves. "I need to go. I can't stay out here anymore next to that..." She turned her head and stole a glance at the dead animal. "He could have been a father...a father looking for some food for his family, and I..." she sniffed, "...I killed it!"

"Wow," Finnick put a hand on her upper arm and gave her a little shake. "You need to get control of yourself before you go back in there. Come on," He led her out of the woods, away from the dead deer. "Take a few breaths, wipe your eyes, and think of something...happy."

"Happy?" Katniss couldn't think of something happy on a good day let alone a bad one. She stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out Peeta's pearl.

"Is that what I think it is?" Finnick looked surprisingly at the tiny jewel.

"Yeah," she rubbed it between her fingers. "Normally I don't carry it around with me, but I put it in my pocket this morning for some odd reason. Guess I just wanted to feel him near."

"And do you?" Finnick asked.

"A little," Katniss wiped the last of her sadness on her sleeve. "I'm not sure why, but...he feels so close to me today Finnick. Maybe it's because I'm going back home?" She shrugged. "I don't know. All I know is that I haven't felt Peeta's presence this strongly since the first few days I was here and I thought my dreams of him were real."

Finnick threw an arm over her shoulder in a brotherly fashion, "Sometimes we just need to feel our loved ones near. Maybe you're on Peeta's mind too, and that's why he feels so close."

"Yeah," Katniss liked that thought. "Maybe." Finnick walked her to the kitchen while she talked to her father in law and waited for the man while Katniss left to prepare for her visit to Twelve.

Gale saw Katniss leaving the kitchen and caught up with her. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be getting dressed up in your Mockingjay uniform right now?"

"I needed to talk to my father in law," Katniss wondered if Gale was going to say anything to her about Peeta. The sight of something around his wrist caught her eye. "When did you get that back, soldier Hawthorne?"

Gale looked down at his communicuff and said, "Yesterday. They thought if I was going to be in the field with you all the time it could be a back up form of communication."

"Guess one of us needs to be accessible," Katniss realized how furious she was with Gale. She had seen him before she went to bed the night before, and he hadn't mentioned a thing about Peeta's airing.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He was growing tired of her taking her bad mood out on him.

"Nothing, Gale. Just repeating what you said," she ran her finger under her nose, and clenched her hands together at her side. "By the way, I totally agree you should be the accessible one...for now." 'Until Peeta gets back,' she thought to herself. "I'm just wondering Gale, will I be able to access you too or are you too busy with Coin and Beetee to have time for me?"

"Listen, I'm just trying to keep peace between you and the soon to be president of Panem," He put his hand on her shoulder and tried a new tactic. "I'm just looking out for your best interest, Catnip."

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes at him. "Tell yourself all the lies you want, but don't go spewing them to me."

Gale let out a few deep breaths and did everything in his power to let his anger go. "So...how's Mr. Mellark holding up?" He asked a little too innocently.

Katniss glared at Gale, now she knew, not only did Gale see the interview, he was purposely keeping it from her. "Ugh!" She stormed away from him towards the elevator that would bring her to Beetee and her waiting Mockingjay uniform.

"Catnip wait," Gale called to her, racing behind her. "Hey," he put his hand on her shoulder to turn her and she threw him an evil glare. "I'm sorry," from the expression on her face it was evident she knew he

was purposely keeping the information about Peeta from her. "You don't understand. We were just trying to protect you."

"Protect me!?" Katniss was sick of this nonsense. "Like seeing Peeta would...what? Make me crawl up into a ball and hide?" She continued stomping her path down the hall.

"Why didn't you say anything, Catnip?"

"Why didn't *I*? Why didn't *you*!?" She countered. "And I did say something last night when I asked you what was going on!"

"I'm sorry, all right?" He tried to take her hand, but she brushed it aside. "I wanted to tell you, I really did, but everyone thought it would make you sick or something."

"It did." Katniss could feel her entire body trembling. "I was sick to my stomach, but now I'm wondering what makes me sicker, seeing Peeta like that or you lying to me for Coin's benefit." As if on cue his communicuff started to beep. "There she is now. Better hurry. You've got all sorts of things to fill her in on."

"I was only trying to help," there was pain in Gale's voice as he said it, then turned to head for the command center.

"Yeah, sure you were," Katniss said to an empty hallway. The entire thing with Gale was growing out of control. Even after the Games when she returned to Twelve, she and Gale hadn't fought as much as they'd been doing lately. She wondered why things were so tense between them, why they couldn't find common ground. They had been friends for so many years, but now she had to ask herself, if she just met him, would she want him as a friend?

The hovercraft ride to Twelve was missing someone, "Where's Haymitch?" Katniss asked with disgust in her voice. Obviously her mentor thought missing this particular trip was the perfect way to avoid the whole Peeta on television issue.

"He won't be joining us for this filming," Plutarch answered. "I believe he said he couldn't handle the sight of Twelve without a bottle."

Pity was not something she was willing to feel for Haymitch Abernathy. He had a pathetic weakness for alcohol that only the laws of Thirteen put a stop to. Not even the woman he cared about was enough to quench his taste for the foul substance. He had lied to her when he said she could trust him, and now she had to face Twelve with Plutarch, and his film crew. 'Oh yeah,' she rolled her eyes, 'and Gale.' Katniss held onto Peeta's locket in one hand and rubbed the pearl in her pocket with the other. "This is when I need you the most," her lips moved as she started talking to Peeta, not giving one good damn if the people around her gave her strange looks. "When no one understands what I'm going through. When they all assume they know me, know what I've been through, and act like it's nothing at all. Like walking through the ruins of Twelve should be easy for me to handle." She thought about the words she wrote to Peeta in the book her doctor had given her, and recited some of them to him, "These stories don't mean anything, when you're not here to tell them to," she sighed as she closed her eyes and ran through the words from start to finish in her head, humming quietly to herself, rubbing at the pearl and gripping the jabberjay locket around her neck, anything to keep herself calm before facing the wreckage better known as Twelve.

"Soldier Mellark," Gale said loudly, snapping Katniss out of her daze.

'My aren't we formal,' she thought to herself before sharply answering, "What?"

Gale's voice changed, the edge was no longer present, "We're here. They're letting us off by the lake."

"The lake," Katniss hadn't expected to go there. Memories of happiness, were associated with the lake, not horror. It was a sacred place to her, one that she didn't want to share with the nation, but there was no getting out of it. "Fine," she stood up. "Let's go."

It was a bit of a shocker for Gale seeing the lake again since escaping Twelve. "Your mom and Prim set up a little medical shelter there," Gale pointed to the abandoned shack. "Peeta's dad dug for katniss at the edge of the lake. He'd say, 'my daughter in law won't let her sister starve,' and pull up katniss root." Cressida began asking him questions about the night of the firebombs, having Gale explain in detail what he went through, how he got out of Twelve and helped the people of his district survive for three days.

Katniss walked around the edge of the lake, bent down and touched the water with a tentative finger. "My dad taught me to swim here." The camera shelled men were focusing on her every move. "I promised Peeta I'd teach him to swim for his birthday, but by the time summer came..." She moved along the edge of the water, "...it was too late." She had never brought Peeta to the lake, yet there were memories of him everywhere. "He loved fish. We'd eat it as often as we could," she smiled at the memories of family dinners. "That and rabbit. I swear that man can live off of rabbit."

"Katniss, did you and Peeta come here often?" Plutarch asked.

"Never," regret filled her voice. "But he knew about it. He was the only one I ever told." Katniss could see Gale moving to the side with his arms crossed over his chest. 'I'm not sure why I didn't trust you enough to tell you about this place, Gale, but it's something you're going to have to accept,' she thought to herself when she read his

body language. "This was a special place for me and my dad. I wanted to bring Peeta here, but I couldn't. They turned the fence on during that winter, and we had no other way of getting here." There was another way, but Katniss wasn't going to talk about that on camera.

Katniss' eyes flew up to the birds flitting about in the trees, the flash of white beneath the black wing. One of the men wearing the hard shelled camera gear moved closer to her and all she could think about was how much they looked like bugs. "I'm sorry," she turned to them, "I really have to stop calling you the insects, but those cameras...they look like beetle shells."

"I'm Castor," one of them spoke, then introduced the other, "and this is my brother Pollux."

Katniss bit the tip of her tongue with her mouth remaining closed when she realized the familiar look of Pollux. The way his face sucked in a bit around the mouth, the strange way he swallowed... 'Avox,' she thought to herself, then turned back to the birds and pointed them out to Pollux. He looked up at them then pointed to Katniss' pin, she nodded her head yes confirming for him that they were mockingjays, then whistled. The birds instantly picked up on her tune echoing a little melody through the forest. Haymitch had said the Capitol did things to an Avox's tongue so they couldn't speak, she had always assumed they cut it out, but the sound of Pollux's whistle and the birds repeating it back surprised Katniss. When he picked up a stick and wrote out the word, sing in the dirt, Katniss let out Rue's four note song. She had sung it many times to the birds of Twelve, and it was so simple, they instantly sang it back. As she looked up to the birds she thought of Peeta and all the times he begged her to sing something. All the times she said no to him because she couldn't face the emotions music stirred within her. She glanced down at Pollux, the

look of anticipation spread across his face, again she thought of Peeta this time she could hear his voice the morning of the reaping for the Quell.

The first sounds of morning filtering into their bedroom just after sunrise, birds chirping, leaves blowing in the early breeze, the shuffle of their drapery across the floor with each gust of wind brought both Peeta and Katniss feelings of pain. They lay facing each other, touching each others faces, placing soft kisses against each others lips. Come two o'clock their lives as they knew it were over. Both of them thought about making a run for it, neither one of them voiced it though. As much as they wanted a life together, it wouldn't mean a thing if the rest of the children in the world had to face what they were facing that day.

"Sing for me, Katniss," Peeta whispered into her ear.

As much as she wanted to give him that one thing, she couldn't. If she allowed those emotions in, she'd never be strong enough to face what they were about to face. "I can't," she whispered back.

She could read the disappointment in his eyes, but he didn't let her know. "That's okay," he said against her lips, "you don't have to. You can kiss me instead."

Katniss held onto Peeta's Jabberjay locket, squeezing it in the palm of her hand until the warmth of the gold seeped through her skin, and mouthed, "This is for all the times I said, no."

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Staring at the bright blue sky filled with billowy white clouds was like staring straight into Peeta's eyes. She missed them. Missed the way they looked at her...made her feel like she was the only person alive. The only person that mattered. Katniss' heart swelled, she swallowed a few times trying to rid herself of the anxiety she felt at his loss. Her mother had fallen into a dark world when her father died, a world Katniss was now all too familiar with. There was a difference though, her father would never return, and Peeta still had a chance of coming back to her. Katniss blew out a small breath between puckered lips working up the courage to do what Pollux asked of her...what Peeta had asked her to do so many times. *"Sing for me, Katniss,"* Peeta's voice asked so innocently in the back of her mind.

Peeta sat on the dirt floor of the tunnel, clutched the computer in his hand, as he watched the scene play out before him. The girl who sang a simple four note tune to the birds, and them repeating it back to her. He was in awe of her...fell into a trance the moment she started to sing.

Katniss spoke directly to Peeta as her lips moved sending the man she loved more than anything a silent message, "This is for all the times I said, no." The cameras were forgotten as were the people surrounding her. The only person she thought of was Peeta. She could feel him as she held onto his jabberjay locket and began to sing.

"All of these scars across my skin

Tell you the story of who I am

So many stories of where I've been

And how I got to where I am

But these stories don't mean anything

If you're not here to tell them to

It's true, I was made for you."

Peeta stared at the computer desperately wanting to look into her eyes, to see the face of the girl with a voice he could only describe as angelic, but the camera never zoomed close enough. It held her profile as she stood by the body of water. The sounds of the birds singing continued until she began to sing. He could feel her suffering...the anguish in her voice as she described a life that had no meaning without the person she loved, and Peeta wondered about the man she was singing to...wished momentarily that it was him she crooned to. That the love she felt was meant for him.

She had written the words to Peeta in the journal Regina had given her after the filming of her first propos. He had told her not to let her head get in the way of her heart, and he was right. When it came to Peeta, she could say anything...share any part of herself as long as her heart lead the way. He believed in her...saw so much more in her than she could ever see in herself. Tears began to form turning her gray eyes into silver pools of mist.

"I climbed across the mountaintop

Traveled across the ocean blue.

I crossed all the lines and I broke all the rules

But I broke them all for you

Because even when I was flat broke

You made me feel like a million bucks

You do, and I was made for you."

The tears finally fell as she thought about the first arena. Climbing uphill and back down again in a desperate search for water. She didn't want to let Peeta down and die. Katniss had promised to live...to win the first Games for him. The Quell was a different story. She had promised herself that she'd die for him until she found out they were having a child then nothing mattered more than keeping it alive, making sure the life she and Peeta had created out of their sheer love for one another made it out of the arena. They had gone through the Games together, shared something life altering that no one else could possibly understand. Others had been in the arena, but none of them faced it the way she and Peeta had. Being a tribute alongside of the one person that held your heart...that was a part of your soul...that you created a life with... Yes, Peeta was the only one that would ever truly understand her.

Peeta's cheeks were drenched in tears, his throat felt as though it were closing up as the girl cupped her hand over her stomach and squeezed the charm on the end of her gold chain. Loneliness consumed him. Not for the people he left behind in the Capitol, but for the life they had described to him. The life they said he had before Snow's drugs took it away. The life she was singing about. He licked at his lips, the taste of salt barely registered when he realized there was no sound coming from the woods other than the girl's voice. "The birds fell silent," he said without realizing it.

"You see the smile across my mouth

It's hiding the words that won't come out

All of these people that think I am blessed

They don't know that my head is a mess

They don't know who I really am

They don't know what I've been through like you do

And I was made for you."

The mockingjays began to pick up her melody. A few chirps here and there, but nothing like the day she sang the Valley Song. The day Peeta had fallen in love with her. The day they started along the path the universe had created for them. A journey, Katniss now knew, she and Peeta were destined to travel together.

Her whole body tensed up as she sang out, her chin lifted to the sky and a slight gravelly sound came from her throat as she sang. Peeta could feel every note vibrate through his body. They flowed through him...pumped through his heart like blood. It was as though his life depended on this woman and the heartfelt message she was singing out. There was a sense of need deep within his core he couldn't explain. His thirst for her...to touch her...to feel her near, was desperate to be quenched.

"You see the scars across my skin

They tell you the story of who I am

So many stories of where I've been

And how I got to where I am

But these stories don't mean anything

If you're not here to tell them to

It's true, I was made for you.

Yes, it's true, I was made for you."

Katniss lifted Peeta's locket to her lips, placing a kiss upon it, imagining it was the man himself, and thought, 'Peeta's right. The birds do fall silent when I sing.' She didn't know where he was, or what he was going through, but in that one moment of time, she could feel him, feel the power of his love surge through her, and knew somewhere in the world he was thinking of her too.

The birds were no longer testing out her melody. They sat on their branches in complete silence. Peeta trailed his finger along the outline of her image on the screen as she took a deep breath then placed a kiss upon the necklace she wore. He'd have given anything to be that piece of jewelry. He sucked in a sharp breath when he heard it...the birds, 'mockingjays,' he thought to himself, began to sing her song in perfect harmony. Peeta Mellark didn't know who she was, or why he felt the way he did, but he did know one thing, this was how he was supposed to feel about Katniss.

Katniss closed her eyes, she had no clue her face was covered in tears, and mouthed to Peeta, "Always...your love is always with me."

Peeta hit the back button on the computer, killing the feed, and closed his eyes. He could no longer watch her without being consumed by guilt. Like he was cheating on Katniss, a woman he barely knew. 'This is insane,' he thought to himself. 'It has to be the drugs they gave to me.' That was the only conclusion he could come to about his emotional tie to the singer. 'No one could feel that way about a person at the mere sight...sound of them, or could they?' He wondered. The image of a little girl flashed before his eyes, standing on a chair, two long, dark braids trailing down the sides of her head, a red plaid dress and the voice of an... Peeta opened his eyes and stared down the

dark tunnel as he spoke to himself in a hush, "...of an angel." His feet slid across the dirt bringing his knees to his chest, his hands curled over the computer, as his heart ached for a girl he had never even met. He needed to see her again. He turned on the computer, pushed the button that led him to her song, and saw her mouth something directly to the camera. Though she made no sound he understood what she said, and let out a little laugh. She was speaking to...*him*. He squinted at the computer through tear filled eyes and noticed something. "It's you," he whispered harshly just as the screen went dark.

"And cut. I don't know how you come up with these things. It's priceless!" Plutarch's order snapped Katniss out of her reverie.

Katniss faced the camera she had forgotten was recording her every move and mouthed, "Come home to me Peeta. These people are insane." She looked down at Pollux whose face was covered in tears, and turned away. She needed to get out of there. Away from all of them. She needed Peeta. "Can I meet you in Victor's Village? I'd like some time alone."

"That wouldn't be too wise, leaving you out here by yourself," Plutarch said.

Gale looked at the camera and asked, "Are those off?" Both men nodded their heads. Katniss didn't know what Gale said to Plutarch when he took him aside or why he asked about the cameras being off, but she was grateful when he walked up to her and said, "We'll walk you to the flat rock, and you can go back to the village through the tunnel. You know how to get into it?"

Katniss nodded her head, "Yes."

"Good, because I have no clue," Gale gave her a halfhearted smile before leading the way.

She walked down the dirt stairs and shut herself beneath the woods. The sound of Plutarch's voice echoed through her earpiece. "Are you able to hear me, Katniss?"

"Yes," she tried not to sound so disappointed. "I'll call you when I'm in Victor's Village." Katniss took hold of one of the torches Cinna had created from synthetic fire off the wall and turned it on, lighting her way through the tunnel. She would have preferred to walk through the woods, but there was no way they'd let her do that alone, so she settled for the peace and quiet her dark surroundings provided. It had been a rough day for her and Gale. Returning to Twelve, listening to everything the residents went through after she shot the force field in the arena, was gut wrenching. She couldn't help but feel like Gale had rescued the people of their district because of her own stupid actions. Shooting the force field was the reason the Capitol sent in the hoverplanes after all. Katniss' light began to flicker off and on impeding her travels. "Come on," she smacked at the hand held torch trying to get it to turn back on. "Great," she grumbled. "Can't see a damn thing."

"Did you say something, Katniss?" Plutarch's voice called through her earpiece.

"No. Just talking to myself." If she had told them she couldn't see anything they'd probably freak out and send Gale in to light her way or drag her back out. She ran her hand along the dirt wall, hoping she'd find another torch, the walls were lined with them, and made her way slowly through the darkness. Her eyes picked up when she saw a flicker of light up ahead. 'Oh, great,' she immediately thought Plutarch had sent someone in to make sure she got to Victor's Village all right.

'I can't even have a few minutes to myself. What a crock.' Katniss was glaring as she walked towards the light, stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out her pearl. The feeling of its smooth surface ran between her fingers as she slowed down her pace, she wanted more time, needed it. Peeta had been a prominent fixture in her mind today. He was there everyday, but today more than others. She feared he was in danger, that death was knocking on his door. She tried to tell herself if he died he wouldn't have to face whatever torture Snow had in store for him, but the thought of living without him was like taking a punch to the gut. "You better be safe," she mouthed to him. "I kept wishing you'd send me a sign during your last interview with Caesar...I was so sad when you didn't, but then I realized you did. I remember that night, Peeta...before the Games. I remember what you said to me."

Katniss looked around at the flying chimes on the Tribute Center's roof. When they settled back down and began to make their soft tinkling noises she said, "I wish we had a place like this in the arena." She turned to Peeta. "A place where we could talk and no one could hear what we were saying."

"Maybe we should take up lip reading?" Peeta tried to make a joke, but Katniss just gave him a soft smile. He knew if they had stayed up there any longer they would be in trouble. They needed to leave before temptation got the best of them, but there was still something she needed to know. "Katniss, I have to tell you something."

"Okay."

"It's important."

Katniss saw the urgency on Peeta's face and said, "I'm listening."

"After you win and you come back here. You'll see the recap of the Games and...I'm not sure how they'll edit it or what you'll be seeing...or...or hearing...I guess what I'm saying is...I'm not going to let them change me."

Katniss didn't understand what Peeta was getting at. "You mean you won't kill anybody?"

"No." He shook his head. "No...I'm sure I will." He lifted an eyebrow and said, "I know I will, but...I'm not going to be a pawn in their Games, Katniss. I've got my own agenda. I'll be playing my own Game." He placed his hands on her upper arms and said, "The important thing to remember is that, no matter what I say...no matter what I do...It's all for you. Will you remember that?" He was nodding his head at her. "Everything I do in that arena is for you. You just have to remember that no matter what they play back during the recap. Okay?"

Katniss began to nod too. "Okay. I'll remember."

"Well, I do. I remember, Peeta." His message was clear. He was still saying what Snow wanted him to say in order to protect her. The light was getting closer and for a split second she wondered why it wasn't moving towards her. If Gale had been sent down wouldn't he have been making his way to her? As quickly as the thought entered her mind, it left. She saw the outline of him standing there. The pearl slipped from her fingers and bounced along the dirt floor until rolling to the tip of his boot. Katniss was frozen in place. She looked at her wrist to check and see if she was still wearing the bracelet that challenged her mental stability, it was gone, and gave her head a quick shake. It couldn't be him. It was impossible, but then she heard his voice, and a chill shot down her spine.

Peeta wasn't sure what to do. Did he wait to make sure no one was searching for him? Effie had to be back at the Capitol by now assuring them that he was no longer in Twelve. His thoughts kept drifting back to the recordings he's seen over the last day of him and Katniss...of the song she sang to the mockin'birds. He wondered if it was for him...if her song was rehearsed or if it came from her heart. Something inside of him said she couldn't have performed that way for a camera. He tried so hard to remember her..."Katniss," he repeated her name to himself over and over again, hoping it would spark more memories. When he found out he was married and had a child on the way his whole body felt like ice. It was a couple of hours after they watched the recording before anyone could explain it to him.

"Effie," Peeta walked into her bedroom after showering, dressed for his upcoming interview with Caesar Flickerman. "Do you know anything about makeup? I'm afraid I'm at a loss when it comes to that." He really didn't want to bother Portia.

Effie looked up from her computer and smiled sadly at him. "You're such a handsome young man. You don't need any makeup." She tucked the computer under her arm and walked him into her main living area. "You look so much like your father. I've only seen him a few times on television, but when I met him in person...I must say I was a bit taken back by your resemblance to him."

Peeta thought about his dad. He missed him. "It's so hard to think he's gone...my brothers...my..." he cleared his throat and lowered his voice down, "...my mother. I keep trying to think of her, but I don't remember her. I don't even know what she looked like."

He couldn't help but notice the look on Effie's face when he told her that. Peeta turned to look at the rest of the people in the room, Effie's personal guard and Johanna were sitting in the middle of the living

room, avoiding eye contact with him. "What did she look like?" He asked Effie.

"You can see her for yourself . I believe we have the ability to pull up the interviews with your family on my computer, don't we Mr. Tanner?"

"Sure," he took it from Effie's grasp and began tinkering with it until something came on the screen. "Here you go."

Peeta watched the woman as she sat next to his father during some sort of interview. Short hair about a shade darker than his, her mouth a hard line until she smiled, which looked forced and never quite reaching her eyes. He remembered her, but when he thought of her he didn't think she was his mother, he thought she was an employee at the bakery. "This is her?" Everyone nodded. "Are you sure?"

"Yes dear," Effie rubbed his shoulder. "That's her."

Peeta jerked when the image of a wooden spoon coming straight for his face entered his mind. "Here," he thrust the computer back towards Steven. "I'm sorry I asked."

"Why don't I wake Portia and we can get her to apply your makeup, hmm?" Effie asked.

"Yeah...okay," Peeta sat on the edge of the sofa and tried to put the horrifying images of being hit out of his mind. Seeing the recording of the woman they called his mother caused a surge of fear and hatred to rush through him. He sat quietly while Portia did her job trying to make him look healthy, not exhausted and beat to hell. "I'm doing this interview with Caesar and I have no clue what to say. How can I defend Katniss when I can't even remember her?"

The room was too quiet until Portia said, "You had a language...a way of speaking to one another that amazed me. Amazed all of us, really. You two could speak without words...practically read each other's minds, and know what the other was saying."

Johanna let out a bit of air and said, "She could shoot like no one I've ever seen. Took down five targets during training in less than five seconds."

The corner of Peeta's mouth lifted in a little grin as he pictured it. He remembered the sound of the birds hitting the floor and the entire room being silent...in awe of the girl that put on a shooting display.

"She's fearless," Steven Tanner's voice surprised everyone in the room. "When I watched her in the Games I was thankful I didn't have to face her. She gives the word courage new meaning."

Effie pat his hand and shared a memory, "She hated dressing up." A sorrowful yet almost fond memory danced in her eyes as she spoke. "When I tried to teach her how to behave like a lady of breeding, she hiked her dress up to her thighs, kicked off her high heels and stormed out of the room when lunch was announced. I was so frustrated with her that day, but then..." Effie lifted her gaze to Peeta's, "...I couldn't understand why you would love someone like her, then you told me to think of the girl that shot an apple out of roasted pig's mouth while in a room full of Gamemakers... that put her those she loved before herself. You opened my eyes to how very special she was...is." Effie paused then added with a loving smile, "She is quite the little spitfire, your Katniss."

Peeta sighed as he listened to them describe her. "She sounds like she's pretty...strong willed."

"The words you're looking for are, as stubborn as an ass," Johanna quirked the corner of her mouth. "But she's more than that. She cares about people."

"She shocked everyone when she saved Thresh's life in the arena," Mr.. Tanner said.

"When she volunteered for her sister," Portia added.

"Yes," Effie remembered the day well. "She was District Twelve's very first volunteer," she said proudly. "You were the second..." she cupped Peeta's cheeks in her hands and said with confidence, "...and the last. Thanks to you and Katniss no one will ever have to be reaped or volunteer again. You two...your love for one another inspired us all." Effie dropped her hands and gestured to the room full of people. "We're all here because of you and Katniss, and that's a wonderful thing darling. So when you go out there and do your interview, you remember that."

"I can't Effie," Peeta tried not to feel heartsick. "I don't remember feeling that way. All I have to go on is what people are telling me."

Mr. Tanner pushed some buttons on the computer screen and said, "No you don't. Here," he handed it to Peeta.

Peeta watched as he and Katniss stood toe to toe with one another and shared a tearful goodbye. He blew out a huge breath when he saw himself drop to his knees saying, "Daddy loves you," to her belly, and swallowed lump after lump in his throat when he watched himself kissing her goodbye...telling her he loved her...running her braid through his fingers. "One, two, three," he mouthed to the computer screen, wondering what her hair felt like, right before he watched himself turn and run towards Johanna. "Whe..." He cleared the frog

out of his throat as he handed the computer back to Mr. Tanner.
"When was that?"

"The Quell," Johanna answered. "It was right before she shot the arrow into the force field."

Peeta just nodded his head. He was desperate to feel what it **looked** like he felt in that arena. He almost asked about the baby, but didn't want to face it. The recording of him and Katniss was more than enough to prove to him that his friends weren't lying to him about their feelings for one another. Between the memories of his mother, and no memories of Katniss, Peeta felt like he was on the verge of insanity. He wished Effie was his real mother. He was sure the love he felt for her was how a son should feel, and he knew, by how much of herself Effie was willing to sacrifice for him, she loved him like he was her very own. It was how he should be feeling about the child he was expecting with Katniss. 'Is it yours?' His mind began questioning it, but he pushed the thoughts quickly away. 'Daddy loves you,' he repeated the words back to himself in his head then thought, 'Daddy... I don't know you, banana nut,' the pet name he had given to the baby registered, and suddenly he felt a pang of remorse for his lack of memories of the child. "Time to go," he stood up knowing he could no longer put off the interview with Caesar. Desperately wanting to stop thinking about all that was taken away from him. "Thanks," he said to the room before holding his hands out for Mr. Tanner to cuff.

Peeta shook his head, clearing the cobwebs from his brain. He needed to get out of his current situation...stranded in the escape tunnel of Twelve. He had no food, no water and he could feel his shakes beginning to resume. He swirled his finger across the icon Effie told him would send a message to the rebels in Thirteen and spoke. "Haymitch? Are you there? It's..." Peeta cleared his throat and stopped speaking when he noticed the tiny white rock roll in front of

his foot. He picked it up, quickly examining it, "Katniss," he said quietly.

Peeta knelt in front of Katniss and held the pearl out to her. "I know I promised to get you a ring, but would you consider accepting a pearl instead?"

Peeta rubbed the tiny white rock between his fingertips, and thought of her.

"Peeta?" Katniss had no clue if he was real or if he was a figment of her imagination. Her breath caught in her throat as he turned to face her.

Peeta dropped the pearl to the ground and took a few steps towards her. They stood less than a yard away from each other. His eyes delved into hers, scanned her features... "Freckles," his voice was trembling when he realized who it was standing before him, "Katniss."

There comes a time in every victor's life when they are posed a question. A time when your sanity is truly put to the test. You've killed. Not just killed, but murdered, innocent children for the most part. Granted you do this to save your own life, at least you think that's what you're doing when you're in the Games, it's a completely different story when you leave the arena as a victor. That's when you realize the life you fought so hard to save was no longer your own, and stopped belonging to you the moment you were reaped. Causing so many fatalities provoked every victor to question their sanity. The question? Is this...*this* particular occurrence in my life real, or a dream?

For Katniss standing within reaching distance of Peeta, being able to lift her hand, reach out and touch him, was unbelievable, but real.

For Peeta, seeing Katniss, right before his eyes, was not real. He had been fantasizing about her, thinking of her while she sang, he had just watched her on the computer Effie had given to him, and he had been drugged over the course of a few weeks, so...no, the vision before his eyes could not have been real, for if it were, he'd surely be feeling a bit more apprehensive about reaching out and touching her. Since this was most likely a dream, he found courage within himself and pushed a tentative finger against her cheek asking the question they were both thinking, out loud. "Are you real, or...not real?"

Her breath caught in her throat, her eyes filled with tears. Katniss felt the pressure of Peeta's finger against her face, an absent, "Ow," came out of her mouth before she answered the question. "Re...real."

Their eyes searched one another for permission to move...to breathe...to start living again. Surely they had both been the equivalent of the walking dead while apart. Peeta knew who she was. He went to school with her...she was from District Twelve...he had heard her sing next to a lake and time stood still...his whole world flipped upside down and around again. That's what he knew for certain. What he didn't know was what his friends at the Capitol had tried to tell him. That they were married...having a baby...that she loved him...*only* him. He knew nothing about that life with the exception of the brief glimpses of her that continually flashed through his mind. "I don't remember loving you," he spoke to her as though she'd be able to fix everything the Capitol did to him with one simple touch. "I want to, but I don't," his desperate plea hung in the air.

She didn't understand what he was saying or why, all she wanted to do was throw her arms around his neck and kiss him. The sound of his voice, the blue of his eyes, the way his hair flopped against his forehead turned a power switch on inside of her that had been in the off position for way too long. "Peeta?" She reached out to him, curled

her hand behind his neck, took a careful step, planted her feet on the earth between his, and lifted herself to him.

Now Peeta was positive this was a dream. He had fallen asleep in the tunnel while waiting for the Capitol hovercrafts to disappear. It had to be, because the feeling of her hand guiding his lips to hers, the taste of her kiss when their mouths finally met, and the soft whimpers that came from both of them as their moist lips pressed against the others...when their mouths brushed back and forth, their eyes held on to the others gaze, and their tongues swirled, was what dreams were made of. His arms wrapped around her body, lifting her to him. Layers of clothing did nothing to conceal her rapidly beating heart as their kiss grew deeper.

Their eyes were closed now, her hands trailing up his back...his shoulders...down his upper arms, and back up to his neck, brushing her thumbs against his jaw, drawing him in. A voice spoke to Katniss in her earpiece, but she didn't hear it. The only thing she could hear was the sound of her blood rushing through her ears.

Peeta's grasp on her grew stronger, he lifted her slightly off the ground. If he was dreaming he was going to make this the best one of his life. He could hear her saying she loved him between their now deep, passionate kiss, and though he wanted to say it back, he couldn't. She was expecting something from him. The profession of a love from a life he didn't know, not a fantastical notion he developed within the past hour about her while she sang in the woods. Sounds poured out from between their mouths. A moan, a soft mew until finally their breathing became so labored they had to pull away. Peeta had to wake up. When he opened his eyes he expected the green and gold glow that had accompanied so many other dreams, but there was none. "Wow," he breathed out against her skin.

"Yeah...wow," Katniss agreed. Still in a state of shock, she didn't ask herself what he was doing there or why. She didn't particularly care, but she did ask him, "What did you mean you don't remember loving me?" She felt herself being pushed gently against the wall, gladly let her back lean against the flat surface, and let Peeta ignore her question. His mouth began to devour hers. His hands ran all over her uniform, which felt way too thick in that moment. She wanted to feel his touch everywhere on her flesh, not through the black protective gear she was dressed in. "Dear God," she began to unbutton, unsnap...unzip, and peel the multiple layers off of herself.

His hands began to tear her vest off and throw it to the ground, something yanked out of her ear and fell with it. "Do you need that?" His gruff, breathless, voice asked.

"No," she shook her head, their kiss not stopping as their bodies...their hearts reacted to seeing one another. "Peeta," she panted when she stood before him with her uniform hanging from her waist, the top part of her body covered in nothing but a bra. "I love you," she spoke into his open mouth as he continued to kiss her. "I love you, Peeta."

He groaned in answer to her declaration, and pulled her away from the wall closer to him until she jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. "Katniss," he had to say her name...the one he remembered prior to his last interview with Caesar Flickerman. "Katniss Mellark," saying it out loud was so familiar as was the feel of her fingers digging into his scalp, and the sound of her small cry between their lips. He didn't know if he was married to her or not. He didn't care. What he did care about was the fact that he now knew he wasn't asleep. This wasn't a dream at all. "Real? This is real?"

"Yes," she said hoarsely.

His head was saying, 'You need to stop.' His heart was saying, 'A few more seconds...just a few more...' "I...I can't," he pulled his head back, but she was relentless. Clamping her arms around his neck, pulling him closer to her, attacking his every sense until he was senseless. Peeta's hands were plastered to her, one against her lower back, the other spread between her shoulder blades, holding her in place as he let her take charge of their kiss. 'You have to tell her,' a moral debate began within him. 'Tell her what? She thinks I'm her husband...this is fine. But it's not! Stop this! Tell her!' "Katniss..." her heels were digging into him as her entire body clung to his like a lifeline. "Please," he tried to speak again.

"Please what?" She wasn't ready to stop yet. Not quite yet. There were questions to be answered, she knew, but right now the only thing she wanted was to feel loved by him, and he wasn't disappointing regardless of what he said to her earlier.

"I...need to...oh God," his legs felt like they were about to give out. "Stohhp," he breathed out. Her kisses traveled up his cheek, across his forehead. At least his lips were free whether or not the rest of him wasn't. "We...I...", he swallowed, licked his lips trying to take every last bit of her flavor in.

"Don't." Katniss finally pulled far enough away from him and took a breather. "Don't say anything yet." His words about not remembering loving her kept echoing in her mind. "Let's not think for a minute, okay? Let's just..." she had to kiss him again. His full lips pressed softly against hers in a gentle full mouthed kiss. "Oh," she let her head drop back a bit then picked it up again. Reality was beginning to invade, and she wasn't ready for it to rear its ugly head yet. She was sure Plutarch was screaming in her earpiece by now. The sorrowful expression of Peeta's worried eyes. How he got to Twelve...why he was alone in the tunnel...how he heard her sing... all of these things

needed to be addressed, but once she did, she knew their happy reunion would be over. She'd have to face the torture he was subjected to. Hear about the pain and agony he suffered through. Worst of all, he'd answer her question about his memory of her. "Let's just enjoy this for a few minutes before...before..."

If she was willing to let things slide for a few minutes, so was he. This might be all he'd be allowed of her. Once he confessed the truth she wouldn't want anything to do with him, and he needed to take whatever he could get. "Okay," he felt her legs slowly slide down the sides of his body. "No," he quickly reached a hand for one of her legs and lifted it back into place around his body. "Not yet. I need to feel you...just let me feel you."

"Touch me," she whispered into his ear. "I need to feel you too...feel your heartbeat against mine." She gripped his shirt in her hands and slowly peeled it upwards until his chest was exposed, but his shirt remained on, his faded bruises went unseen. Their eyes locked, a loving silver gaze...a wondrous blue stare. Katniss pressed her chest against his, felt the pounding of his heart against her own, and let her whole body collapse in his arms. Her forehead pressed against his, her arms rested around his neck, her legs now dangling as he held her up by the apples of her buttocks. "You're home," she softly sobbed against his lips. "You're home."

There were too many questions to be answered, but for now Peeta knew... "I'm home."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 11: Real or Not Real?, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Ten: Real...or Not Real?

Peeta was found in the tunnel of Twelve by Katniss. Effie was captured by the Capitol and her time as a rebel spy is over.

Sorry for the delay, but I dislocated my shoulder a while ago and have been having problems with it which means massive physical therapy and no sitting at the computer for extended periods of time without suffering through a great deal of pain.

While writing this chapter it dawned on me that I had too many questions regarding the K/P reunion and they must be addressed, so this chapter is a K/P POV of Peeta's arrival in

Thirteen. I know I tend to follow the book chapter by chapter, but I had to make an exception in this case. The next chapter, which is almost done, will be a combination of chapters ten and eleven in the book. If you'd like to find out when I'm posting or the status of this story feel free to follow me on tumblr at jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com. I have finally created pages for the 74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were and will be working on the Catching Fire series in the near future.

Thank you to all of you who have been patiently awaiting this next chapter, for reading and reviewing. Thank you to Everlarkrecs for adding my stories to her page, and thank you to S and A for giving so much of their time.

Anyone want to see how things are going in the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

The hospital room was silent with the exception of the shuffling of the guard's feet against the floor. Peeta sat on the edge of the hospital bed, one hand cuffed to the railing the other reaching for the lump on the back of his head where he had been struck. He was no longer filled with the rage that had been coursing through him earlier, instead he was consumed with guilt. Guilt for the way he had treated Katniss...for the things he had done. Peeta closed his eyes in regret, wondering if she'd ever want to speak to him again. Things had gotten out of hand due to the drugs that were flowing through his bloodstream, 'and your jealousy,' he silently said to himself. "Christ," he mumbled when he remembered how violent he had been earlier. His hand ached a bit from the punches he had thrown, landing across a jaw...in the gut... He groaned as he recalled what had happened. His stomach churned as a feeling of nausea swept through him. The

sound of the hospital room door opening had him turning to see who had entered. To his surprise Katniss stood in the doorway.

"Hey," she said nervously. "Can I come in?"

Why she'd want to, Peeta had no clue, but he was grateful she was there. "Yeah," he answered. "You may want to keep your distance though," he gave her a warning, not knowing how he'd react.

"Do you think you're going to hurt me?" She walked up to him, and took the spot next to him on the hospital bed. "Because I don't. I'm not afraid of you, Peeta."

Her hand reached for his but he snatched it away. "You should be." His eyes focused on a spot between his dangling feet. "I...I could have killed you."

"But you didn't," Katniss reached for his hand again. "Stop pulling away from me," she said roughly. She needed to touch him, to draw strength from him or she didn't know if she'd make it through this. "Please," she gently begged changing her tone.

Peeta turned his palm upward and allowed her to hold his limp hand. "I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "I don't know what came over me."

Katniss squeezed his hand in hers, "It's poison, Peeta. Those drugs are causing you to get violent...to..." she hated saying it out loud. It only confirmed what the doctors had told her after listening to the recording Effie had sent to them, "...to forget me...what we had."

"No," he turned sharply towards her. "I've already forgotten that."

"Not all of it, Peeta," Katniss turned her whole body to face him. "You didn't forget everything or you wouldn't have held me so tightly." The

fingers of her free hand traveled to her lips of their own accord, drawing the feel of his lips pressing against hers back. "You wouldn't have kissed me that way."

He was in her arms and suddenly life was good again. It didn't matter what Peeta said about not remembering his love for her, she knew...just knew in the deepest recesses of her heart, their love could withstand anything. It had to. Katniss felt her throat closing up, and her eyes burning as she placed her feet down on the ground. "I love you," she whispered hoarsely in hopes that he would repeat the sentiment back to her, instead she heard him gulp, and felt his hands slowly drop to his sides. She could feel the trembling in the pit of her stomach, the grip of uncertainty squeezing the blood out of her heart, and the world closing in around her as reality finally set in.

Peeta could sense the pain he was causing her and hated himself for it. He opened his mouth and closed it over and over again telling himself to say the words back to her, but how could he? "Katniss," he spoke softly as he forced his hands to his sides. "I...I'm...sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you," he reluctantly pushed her away by the shoulders. "You think I'm something...someone I'm not."

"Don't," she tried to hold him again, but his hand went up, preventing her from closing the gap between them. "Peeta, you're just tired. You've been through hell...that's all," she fretted.

He shook his head from side to side. "No, I'm..." he closed his eyes and tried to figure out what to say, "I don't know what I am anymore." He lifted his trembling hand out to her. "This...this is what I am. Hooked on some drug that takes every good memory of my life and turns it against me." He shoved his hand into his pocket. "The sickest part is how much my body is craving that crap right now...and I don't want it. I don't," he said to convince himself, "but eventually I'm going

to need it." He took his hand out of his pocket and revealed the source of his misery to her. The syringe Effie had stuck inside of his pocket while they were riding in the elevator at the Capitol prior to his escape.

"What is that?" She stared at the needle he held out to her.

"This is most likely going to be the death of me." He swallowed the huge lump he had in his throat before explaining what had been going on in the Capitol while he was taken captive. The drugs. The recordings of her and Gale, and everything else Effie had told him about. "Snow...he tried to turn me against the rebels...against you, but Effie got me out there in the nick of time. He would've completely wiped my memory of everything if she hadn't helped me escape this morning."

Katniss sat on the dirt floor of the tunnel staring at him in disbelief.

"So..." she cleared her throat, "...so you really don't remember me?" It was too difficult to believe.

"No, I have some memories of you. I know who you are...I remember we went to school together...we're from the same district...fighting alongside of you in the Games, but honestly...most of that is a blur."

"Then why did you kiss me when you saw me?" She needed to know.

Did he tell her he had been wishing she were with him when he watched her sing? That the sound of her voice caused his heart to swell, and left him breathless? Heat radiated through his cheeks as he answered, "It felt..." he searched for the appropriate word without giving too much away, "...right."

"Oh." It wasn't the exact answer she was hoping for.

Peeta was sitting on the floor opposite her, his legs sticking out in front of him, his hands tucked under his thighs in order to keep them still.

"Everyone tried to help me. Johanna, Portia, Effie...Annie...they all tried to tell me about you...remind me about the life we had together, but..." he lifted his eyes to her tear streaked face, "...most of it's gone."

Katniss wiped her hand under her nose and sniffed. "So where does that leave us?"

Peeta looked down at his lap with sorrow in his voice and said, "I don't know."

She tried to take it in, all the things he said about seeing her with Gale in the woods, glimpses of their life together invading his mind, but stirring up no feelings other than regret, and chose to address the Gale situation. "Those recordings were a fake, Peeta," she said carefully. "Gale and I...those things never happened."

"Effie said the same thing. She said she was there when they altered the recordings of us, but..." He ran his hand through his hair, heartache filled his voice, "God, Katniss, it was so damn real. I've tried to tell myself that they lied to me...that everything they did was to hurt me...to hurt the rebellion, but then I remember those images of you and him...hearing you telling him that I meant nothing to you, and it's more than I can handle."

*Katniss was on her knees in front of him, holding him by the upper arms, "**You**...you mean everything to me, Peeta. Everything," desperation dripped from her voice. "You have to believe me."*

Her face was inches from his as he looked into her eyes, "I want to." Touching her was too tempting. He reached out a tentative hand and caressed her cheek speaking tenderly to her, "I want to put it all

behind me and tell myself that I can just forget the things I've seen...remember the things they've taken from me..."

"Then do it," she rested her forehead against his. "Just forget it all...forget what they did to you, and...and screw remembering me," she said forcefully. "If you can't then we'll just start over," she was almost frantic. "From right now...from this moment." She took his hand between the palms of hers and squeezed. "We can get to know each other again...you can learn things about me, and..." her voice began trembling, "...and maybe you'll fall in love with me again." Considering she thought herself to be unlovable, this was a tall order.

He was so tempted to tell her he was pretty sure she had already captured his heart when he heard her singing in the woods, but he still thought it was an insane notion, and no one could ever fall in love at first sight. 'But it wasn't first sight,' he silently said to himself. 'You've seen her before.' "It was love at first song," he spoke without realizing it.

Katniss' face perked up, "Yes," she stroked his cheek. "You heard me singing when I was five," she sniffed through a soft smile. "You fell in love with me after I sang the Valley Song on our very first day of school."

Peeta remembered the image that had flashed through his mind earlier. "Your hair," he studied her brown tresses, "They were in two braids instead of one."

She nodded, "Ye...yes."

He stared at her for a minute trying to decide what to do, and thought it best to put this all aside. Facing it hurt too much. "My head is a bit messed up right now, Katniss. Can we...can we stop talking about this for a little while?"

She sat back on her haunches. "Yeah...sure." She felt a chill shoot through her and wrapped her hands around her waist. "I should probably get dressed."

"Don't rush on my account," he said in an attempt to lighten the morose mood he had brought upon them.

She looked at his bruised torso and reached out a tentative hand, never quite touching him. "You're hurt."

Peeta pulled his shirt down. "It's fine. I can barely feel these anymore," he lied about the marks on his body that ached beyond belief.

"Guess we should get going, huh?" Katniss suggested. The need to get him medical treatment became urgent. "You..." she took a deep breath and blew it out in an attempt to regain her strength. "You need a doctor," she said with a stiff lip. "Let's go." She stood up and pulled the top of her uniform back on, yanked on the vest and plugged the earpiece back into her ear. "Plutarch?"

"Katniss! Thank heaven!"

"Sorry about losing communication with you, but..." she turned to look at Peeta who was visibly shaking, "...Plutarch, Peeta's here. Effie helped him escape, but he's in need of medical attention."

"Yes, we overheard you greeting him," Plutarch told her and she wondered exactly how much they had heard.

"Katniss how bad is he?" Gale joined in.

"Bad," she said with concern in her voice. "I'm not sure if he's strong enough to make it through the tunnel to the village. We're closer to the woods, can the craft pick us up there?"

"You'll have to make it to that clearing," Gale said to her. "Can you do that?"

"We really have no choice," she studied Peeta who was trying to get a hold of himself. "I'll contact you when we get close."

"See you soon, Catnip."

She faced the dirt wall, inhaled through her nose, and blew out slowly from her mouth. "Okay," she was in control, or as in control as she could be. "Time to go." She turned and saw him attempting to pick up some items from the ground. "What's in the boxes?" Katniss asked as she looked around the tunnel for an extra torch.

"Effie said I have to give them to a Dr. Valero. That she'd know what to do with the stuff inside," there was an unmistakable tremor in his voice. "Katniss," he held his hand out to show her how much he was shaking, and sat back down. The boxes he had been carrying earlier now felt like they weighed a ton. His legs were weak, and the trembling was causing a stabbing pain to shoot through his entire body. Like he was being shredded apart from the inside out. "I'm not going to make it."

"You will," she knelt in front of his sitting position. "You have to. I...I can't lose you again."

He didn't know what to believe anymore. It sounded like she meant everything she said to him, and it felt like she loved him when she kissed him, but there was still so many doubts running through his mind. His skin was crawling, the chills were starting at the base of his neck and radiating downward...the same things that occurred while he was in the elevator before he started to convulse. "Katniss, you need to give me this," he held out the needle full of jacker juice with a quivering hand. "I don't think I can get it in my vein on my own."

"No," she could see the sweat forming on his brow, reached out a hand to his forehead, sure she would find him feverish, and was surprised at his icy temperature. "Peeta, you're going to be fine." She gripped his hands in hers and squeezed. Hatred towards President Snow filled her for what he did to Peeta. "They've got you hooked on that stuff, and the only way to get better is if it works itself out of your system."

"Then...it better..." he began to pant, "...work itself out fast." Things started to close in on him, his head was thumping...screaming...spinning.

"Peeta!" Katniss yelled when his whole body started writhing across the dirt floor. "NO! PLUTARCH!" She screamed into her communication device, but there was no answer. "Peeta please," she knelt over his body, softly smacking at his cheeks, trying to get him to come back to her. Her hand reached for the syringe. "I don't want to do this," she cried out in frustration. "I don't want to poison you!" Tears were streaming down her face as she ripped a piece of his shirt off at the hem and tied it around his arm, remembering the things she had been taught by her mother over the years. She had to press her knee against his hand to keep his arm still, smacked at a vein in order for it to bulge out, and pulled the protective cover off of the needle's point with her teeth, spitting it far away. She felt damned. Again she was at the mercy of the Capitol and its powerful medicine, only this time when she gave Peeta a shot, she was performing the same action that Snow had while Peeta was imprisoned. She could feel the needle slipping into his skin and watched for the sign of blood to flow back into the syringe signaling that she had it in the right place, then pressed the plunger slowly down, forcing the green gunk into his arm until his body stopped its vicious quaking. "Please don't die," she leaned her head on his chest and listened to his heart after pulling the needle from his arm and dropping it to the side. "Don't leave me. Stay

with me Peeta. Stay with me," she turned her face into his shirt, gripping it in her clutches and let out a soft sob when she heard his response.

"Always," his hand felt light as a feather when he lifted it to her head and rested it against her hair. The initial rush of the drug shot through him as his body went from ice cold to burning hot. "It's warm in here."

The sickeningly sweet stench of honey accosted her nostrils as Peeta's body flamed beneath her. "What was that?" She lifted herself up and looked down into his eyes which were almost black.

"The same thing that's in those boxes," he breathed out a sigh of contentment much like Haymitch after he got his first taste of alcohol after being without it for too long.

Katniss dug through the boxes Peeta brought with him, read the labels on the small containers and sucked in a breath. "No more," she slapped her hand against the cardboard. "You are not getting anymore of this shit!"

Feeling like he had some control of his faculties, Peeta sat upright and took in his surroundings. The dirt walls, the boxes, the empty syringe, then his eyes landed on Katniss. He couldn't explain to himself why he needed to touch her so badly, or why he was so angry with her.

"Come here," the hand that reached for her was no longer trembling. "Katniss, come here," he spoke again, his voice more demanding.

"You look better," she hated the reason why. Her eyes scanned his as he pushed his hand closer to her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him hold her. "Peeta you can't have anymore of that stuff. It will kill you."

"It'll kill me if I don't have it," with the exception of the anger he could feel simmering within, he really enjoyed the way he was feeling at that moment. A renewed sense of strength flowed through him like the day he had killed the Peacekeepers. His limbs which were just twitching, and felt like wet noodles were now itching to move. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he tried to focus on what was happening.

"Peeta, we have to go," she pulled away from him. "Are you able to walk?" After seeing what she had shot into him, she had to get him back to Thirteen as soon as humanly possible.

"Yeah," his voice slurred slightly as he stood up. "I'll be fine now." He was more than fine, he was invincible, or so he thought. Though his mind was telling him he could accomplish anything, his body was going through hell from the chemicals swimming through his bloodstream.

They walked through the majority of the tunnel in silence, Katniss carried her bow and the smaller of the two boxes. Peeta the large one, and huffing with each step without knowing it. "Plutarch?" Katniss spoke as they neared the end of the tunnel, but there was no sound coming from the earpiece.

"Where are they?" Peeta asked of their escape party.

"I don't know." She wondered briefly if this is what Haymitch felt like when she ignored his calls while in she was fighting in District Eight. "Come on. We better hurry if we're going to make it to that rendezvous spot on time."

"Think they'll still be there if the Capitol's crafts are out there looking for me?" Peeta didn't.

The thought of Snow's men searching for them hadn't even entered her mind. She did her best to hide her concern for Peeta's sake. "There's no way they'd leave us out here to fend for ourselves."

Peeta didn't believe it for one minute. He had been in the arena, and the one thing he knew was that everybody fought to the death for their own self-preservation, not remembering that he and Katniss were the exceptions to that rule. "Why not?"

"Peeta, we're too important to the rebellion, and now that you're back...trust me...Coin's probably chomping at the bit to get us out of here."

"Who's Coin?"

Katniss didn't know how to explain the woman and all that she had done so she did what she was good at, avoided the details and gave him the short answer, "President of Thirteen."

"Did I know that?" He thought the name sounded vaguely familiar.

"I'm not sure. I met her when I was coming out of a hellish nightmare and then submerged into a real life one when I heard the sound of her voice telling my doctor to kill our baby." 'So much for avoiding the topic,' she thought to herself, regretting what she had said immediately.

Peeta stuck a hand out to Katniss' shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. "She did what?"

Katniss blew out a breath and said, "Guess you could say I've been going through my own personal torture while you were gone." She noticed the way Peeta's eyes kept flashing towards her stomach then back up again. "I've got a lot to fill you in on, but we don't have time

now, plus..." she pointed to her earpiece, sending Peeta an unspoken message.

He nodded at her, and mouthed, "They're listening to us, aren't they?"

Katniss' eyes flew opened when she saw him use their familiar language. "Don't know," she shrugged. Unsure if she should mention what he had done, she tested his memory and mouthed, "How are you feeling now?"

"Okay," he mouthed back. "A little...I don't know how to explain it. I almost feel like a volcano ready to erupt."

"From those drugs?"

He nodded.

A burst of static shot through her earpiece. "Plutarch?" She waited. "Plutarch?"

"Nothing?" Peeta asked suddenly worried that they were going to be left on their own regardless of what Katniss said.

"Maybe they're out of range or something." She reached for the controls that would open the exit of the tunnel.

"Wait," Peeta stopped her. "Katniss, what if the Capitol's crafts did come back to search for me?"

'Could that be why they weren't answering,' she wondered. "Maybe we should wait here until we hear from them?" She sat on a dirt step.

"Good idea," Peeta set his cargo down and took a seat at Katniss' feet. "So..." he turned an inquisitive glance her way, "What's new?"

Katniss had to laugh at the absurdity of their situation.

The sound of her light laughter caused a rush of emotions to flow through him he found hard to explain. The lava that threatened to spew from deep within him was instantly replaced with curiosity. "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking, this morning I went hunting with Finnick, and..." she let her eyes rest on his features. It didn't matter that he looked worn...thin...exhausted. He was breathtakingly beautiful. "You were on my mind all day. It was like something inside of me could feel you near. I thought maybe," the laughter was gone, "maybe they had killed you." She looked into the darkness of the tunnel. "I kept rubbing my pearl," she reached into her pocket for it, but it was gone. "Oh no," she stood up. "I left it."

Peeta pulled it out of his pocket and held it out to her. "It was lying next to the boxes."

She stared at the sight of the pearl glaring up at her from his open palm, and reached for it, taking up her spot on the step again.

"I remember giving that to you," Peeta said as she took it. When her hopeful eyes met his he clarified, "Just what I said, not the circumstances surrounding it."

"Oh," she said dejectedly.

Unsure of what to say to her he said, "Finish your story."

Katniss closed her fingers over the pearl, then shoved it in her pocket for safe keeping. "I kept rubbing it thinking somehow maybe you'd be able to feel me...know how much I missed you. Then we came back to Twelve and memories of you were everywhere. The fish swimming in

the lake...the mockingjay's song...the cluster of willow trees..." Her face turned soft, as did her voice. "I remembered that morning so vividly. The way you described the sunrise..." she smiled tenderly at him, "...Peeta's Sunset, to me...I kept wishing I could go back in time and run away with you. That we had never entered the Quell."

Peeta nodded. "Can't tell you how many times I wished I could have avoided that myself."

Her gaze met his. "When I saw you in the tunnel, I honestly thought I was imagining it."

"Me too," he nervously scratched behind his ear. "I didn't know if you were real...or..." He let out a huff of air, "...or not real."

"I'm real," she trailed her finger down the side of his face. "So are you."

They sat staring at one another for a few moments before Peeta asked, "Katniss...the baby...is that real?"

"Yes," she said gently. "Very real." There was so much to explain to him. The listening device in her ear forgotten she reached out and took his hand, placed it on her lower abdomen and said, "Banana nut is in there, and it's healthy...beautiful. Oh, Peeta, I can't wait to show you...for you to hear its heartbeat."

"You've seen it?" He asked with a hint of uncontrollable excitement in his voice.

"Mmm hmm," she nodded. "It's kind of like a lima bean with arms and a head. All curled up into a ball..." she sighed. "You won't believe it when you see it."

"And is it..." he stopped himself before he asked her if it was his asking instead, "...is it a boy or a girl."

"I don't know yet. It's still too early, but Dr. Valero says any day now we should be able to find out."

Peeta trailed his fingers across the hard surface of her black uniform where the baby grew. "I'm glad everything's okay with it." He really was. Whether it was his or not, he'd never wish ill on a child.

Katniss' face morphed into one of concern. "Peeta there are some things I need to tell you...about the baby." she held her head down, and Peeta was sure this was when she'd tell him that it was Gale's not his. "President Coin...she doesn't know about the baby." Katniss lifted her eyes to his. "Practically no one does." She went on to explain what had been happening since she was in Thirteen, about her role as the Mockingjay, visiting District Eight, and said, "Haymitch thinks we should keep the baby a secret until he figures out what to tell Coin."

*It was a lot to take in, everything she had said. "What do **you** think we should do?"*

Katniss thought for a moment then said, "The Games are still on, Peeta, and the one thing Haymitch knew about...was good at, was how to play the Games."

"So you want to follow his advice?"

"Yeah. I think we should, but if you don't want to, then we'll go straight to Coin and tell her about it." Katniss felt an enormous weight lifted off of her shoulders now that she didn't have to face this alone. "This is our baby, and we should make these choices together."

"Our baby," Peeta said quietly. He needed to know. "Katniss, is it...mine?"

Hearing his question shot a dagger straight through her heart. "Yes," she knelt in front of him and gripped his hands in hers. "Of course it is. Why would you think for one minute that it's not?"

He lifted his eyes to hers. "Gale." Saying the name out loud suddenly brought feelings of aggression back to the surface.

She was taken completely by surprise when he said that. "Gale?"

"Those things Snow showed me...some of those things..." He narrowed his eyes at her, "...they were a little too real, about you."

"Like what?" She was terrified of the answer.

*"Like you and Gale in the woods...kissing each other behind my back," his voice was hard. "How long was **that** going on?" His eyes pierced hers.*

Katniss had no clue what he was talking about. She had never... "Oh," it suddenly struck her that she did kiss Gale in the woods and attempted to explain. "That was one time Peeta, and we weren't even together then. Plus you knew about it. I told you all about it, and you said you expected Gale would do something like that, so don't get mad at me now, when you didn't get mad at me back then." She turned and said harshly. "Got to hand it to Snow...he really knew what buttons to push on you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He barked at her.

"You've been jealous of Gale since we were kids. I'm sure Snow knew, and once he had you in his custody, he preyed on your weakness,"

she hadn't meant to be so cruel, and quickly tried to remedy her tone. "Look, I'm not saying you had nothing to be jealous of. Gale had feelings for me, but we worked through them, you and I. We made it past that part of our lives, and now you and Gale are friends." At least she hoped they would still be. "We all are."

"He's no friend of mine," Peeta couldn't imagine forging a relationship with the guy now that he'd found out the recordings of him and Katniss weren't fakes. "You two want to live happily ever after with your kid then go ahead. Leave me the hell out of it."

"Our kid!?" That was the second time he suggested he wasn't the father, and she didn't like it one bit. She narrowed in on him, holding him in place with her stare. "What the hell are you accusing me of?"

"Oh, I think you know, Katniss." He brushed her hand off of him. "Call them again. I want to get the hell out of here." Something inside of him said, he **had** to get out of the tunnel before he lost control of his emotions.

"No," she stood her ground. "You're going to answer me. Tell me right now, what you think I did."

'Fine,' he thought to himself as the anger bubbled within him. 'You asked for it.' "You didn't deny it. You just admitted that those recordings were real," he stabbed her with his words.

"I did no such thing," she said in utter horror.

"So now you're saying you **didn't** kiss him?" Peeta waited and saw the blush creep up on her face. "Yeah, that's what I thought. You kissed him...just like you kissed me a little while ago." Anguish met anger when he said, "God knows what else the two of you have done

behind my back." It was tearing him up inside remembering these things...saying them out loud.

*"No, Peeta," Katniss' voice was frantic, "that wasn't me and **Gale** in the woods. That was me and **you**. You were the one that asked me what kind of kiss it was...that held my face in your hands," she gripped his hands and pressed them against her cheeks trying to relive the moment. "That was you and me."*

"It was Gale!" Peeta screamed at her and yanked his hands away. The image of the two of them was so vivid. The glow around Gale's features not once hinting to Peeta that Effie was right and the recordings could have been a fake. "I know what I saw, Katniss!"

*"No," she shook her head, her insides trembling. "Peeta," she said much softer now, "they replaced your image with his...but what they showed you...that wasn't what happened. Gale doesn't even know about the baby. He thinks it's dead. If he were the father, don't you think I'd have told him about it?" Katniss could see Peeta's body tense up. "I'm going to say this once, and that's it. You are the only...**only** man I have ever been with. The only man I've ever **wanted** to be with." She reached out and cupped his cheek. This time he let her caress his skin, thinking about how badly he had wanted her to do this to him only moments ago."You and I...we were made for each other, Peeta. I never wanted...never loved Gale. Ever." Peeta lifted his eyes to hers. "I love you," she said softly then mouthed, "I love you, Peeta."*

As quickly as the anger had entered his system it was gone, and in its place was need. A suffering he couldn't explain. "I want to tell you that, but if I do...you'll think I remember what we had, and I don't."

"Then why would you say it?" She could no longer expect the words from him. "When you feel it...if you feel it, you'll say it. Until then...you could just let me love you." She gingerly made her way to him and

brushed her lips against his, let her fingers travel through his hair and fell into the arms he finally opened up to her.

A brutal argument, then making up was nothing new to Katniss, but to Peeta, it was confusing. He couldn't explain why he suddenly believed everything she said, but the second he felt her kiss, he found, not only did he believe her, but forgave her as well. When they pulled apart from each other Peeta ran his hand down her braid mouthing, "Read my lips."

Katniss gasped. Whether or not he knew what he was saying, she didn't care. Her arms encircled his neck, her face buried in his shoulder, as she clung for dear life.

"Catnip?" Gale's voice came through the earpiece.

"Gale?" She pulled away from Peeta and pointed at the device in her ear when she saw the rage quickly flash in Peeta's eyes. "Where are you guys?"

"There were some Capitol hovercrafts in the vicinity. We had to pull out and cut radio contact in case they picked up our transmissions," Gale explained. "Are you two still in...hiding?"

"Yeah," Katniss answered. "Peeta was afraid of that so we stayed put."

*"Plutarch said you two would know something was up when we didn't respond to you." Gale paused for a second. "Coin sent in reinforcements, so **we** won't be picking you up. There's a heavily armed craft, with a medical team on it, about five minutes away from you. They'll be able to drop a claw and pick you both up."*

"Okay," she held onto Peeta's hand, worry filling her voice. "Are the Capitol hovercrafts still searching for Peeta?"

"We haven't detected them for the past thirty minutes, but we're still expecting the worst," Plutarch answered instead of Gale. "Be careful, Katniss, and take care of our Jabberjay."

"Don't worry about us," she gave Peeta a fiery stare that stated it was time to put their game faces on, stood to her feet, and said, "Peeta and I are a team...victors. We always take care of each other."

Peeta took this as a sign to get to his feet too. He easily picked up the boxes, stacking one on top of the other, and looked towards the hidden buttons that would enable them to enter the woods. A glimpse of he and Katniss in the arena flashed through his mind as he said the words, "Let's do this." The sounds of the woods...the scent of it, stirred Peeta's senses. He had been here before. "I was a hunter," he said to himself.

"What?" Katniss lifted the top of the flat rock and quickly disguised the tunnel.

Peeta honestly didn't know if he was or not. "Katniss? I was a hunter. Is that real, or..."

"Not real, Peeta," she led the way with her bow loaded. "You scare away game with your heavy footsteps." She looked down at his prosthetic, and used the words he used to, "Lead foot, remember?"

"No," he walked heavily behind her, the crunching of breaking branches, rustling of dried leaves were so loud it sounded like a herd of elephants were making their way through the woods. "Okay. Now I remember," he said as his prosthetic got caught under a fallen branch.

The leaves began to blow, the branches of the trees bent in the gusts of wind the hovercraft caused as the claw was slowly dropped towards them. "Go ahead," Katniss stepped back so Peeta could be picked up.

"No, you go," he stood to the side.

"Peeta, I went first last time and look where that got us," the claw was halfway down. "Just go."

He stepped close to a willow tree. "Get banana nut out of here, Katniss."

How could she argue? "Come with me," she held his hand out to him. "We can sit in it, like Finnick and I did."

The metal claw dangled, waiting for a passenger. "Together?" He asked as he took a tentative step towards her.

"Together," she threw her bow over her shoulder.

He sat the large box on his lap, an arm draped over it, holding it in place, a hand clinging to the metal contraption carrying them upwards into the waiting craft when his eyes drifted downwards towards the cluster of willow trees. An image of Katniss standing in the midst of the weeping branches, white blooms in blossom surrounding her, the sunrise behind her, and a slight blush on her cheeks. He could see her as clear as day looking beautiful in a garment that he considered quite odd for the woods, but the colors of it were spectacular. A contradiction to the rising sun. For a moment he wondered if he actually remembered that, or if it was one of the recordings Snow had shown him. The hovercraft pulled them into safety and swiftly headed towards District Thirteen.

Katniss sat to the side as the medical team that had been sent in to care for Peeta went to work; providing hydrating fluids to him, treating and bandaging wounds she hadn't noticed, looking over the canisters inside of the boxes Peeta brought with him, determining that antibiotics wouldn't cause any harm. Before she knew it Peeta was sitting in a wheelchair being taken to the medical bay where their family, Haymitch and Dr. Valero waited for them. Katniss scanned the area for Gale, hoping with all her heart he wasn't part of the welcome back party waiting for Peeta in medical. She wasn't sure if Peeta would be able to face Gale after the things Snow had subjected him to. "Plutarch," she whispered to him as they walked down the hall. "Gale's not in medical, is he?"

"No." Plutarch slowed his pace down and spoke quietly to her. "He's updating President Coin on the transmissions we picked up from the Capitol hovercrafts. Why?"

"No reason," Katniss gnawed at her bottom lip.

Peeta was overwhelmed with the amount of people awaiting his return, and began to question reality again when he found out his father was alive, and in Thirteen. He gripped the handles on the wheelchair, looked over his shoulder to make sure Katniss was still close by, saw her talking to Plutarch Heavensbee... 'He's a rebel,' Peeta reminded himself at first glance of the man, then held his breath when they rounded the corner where his dad stood with tears in his eyes. "Stop!" he called out before they reached his father. "Katniss! Katniss!"

"I'm here," she ran to his side. "What is it?"

"Is this real?" Peeta's hands frantically reached for hers. "Is this real!?"

"Yes, Peeta." She lifted his hand to her lips, placing a kiss against his clenched fists. "I promise it is."

Small pants escaped from between his lips. **"If there's one person you must place your trust in, it is Katniss,"** Effie told him...drilled into Peeta's head, so when Katniss confirmed that everything around him was real, he tried his best to believe her.

"Dad?" Peeta stood from the chair and took a tentative step towards his father. "Is it really you?"

"Peeta," his father walked slowly towards him until both men took large steps into the others arms. A combination of tears through laughter was shared when Peeta hugged Prim...Evelyn... "Haymitch!" He gripped his mentor tightly and placed a hard kiss on the man's cheek. "That's from Effie."

Haymitch thumped at his back. "How...how's she doing, boy?"

Peeta had been wondering the same thing since he left her that morning. "Wish I knew." They shared concerned looks. "She sent something for you." Peeta turned to Katniss, "Where's that computer?" It was handed to Peeta by a soldier. "Here," he placed it in Haymitch's waiting hands. "She said you and Plutarch should go to sponsor gifts and look up lamb stew."

Haymitch placed a hand on Peeta's shoulder, "You look like shit, boy," he chuckled.

"Thanks," Peeta grinned. "I feel like shit too."

"Bet you do," Haymitch pulled him in for another hug. "Damn good to see you. Katniss has been lost without you around."

The welcomes kept coming and coming as Peeta's blood was drawn, and tests were run. Beetee entered...Finnick...Greasy Sae... "Delly!" Peeta jumped up from his hospital bed and squeezed her tightly, crying and smiling at the same time, into her shoulder. "I didn't know if you made it or not."

The boxes were taken out of the room to be examined by Beetee, and several medical professionals of Thirteen just as President Coin entered and introduced herself. With her hand stuck out in front of her she said, "Welcome back to the rebellion, Peeta. We're all pleased to have our Jabberjay with us."

"Thanks," he stole a quick peek at Katniss who was leaning against a table with her arms crossed across her chest, staring intently at Coin.

"There's plenty you need to brief us on, but none of that can be accomplished until your medical treatment is completed, so we'll all excuse ourselves and give you a little time to adjust." Coin looked around the room, dismissing everyone with a nod of the head. "Good to meet you," she said as she walked out of the room.

Peeta waited until he and Katniss were the only ones left before saying, "Brrrrrr," he faked a chill. "That greeting from Coin was so warm and friendly. What was that? One or two sentences she said to me?"

"Yeah, she's not big on waste. You won't be catching her making conversation or anything. She might waste a word." Katniss hopped up on the bed next to Peeta. "You doing okay?"

"I guess," he ran a hand through his hair and confessed, "Not really." He stared out into space, "Katniss I can't tell you how hard this is. Snow told me my dad was dead, yet he stood right in front of

me...hugged me. He said my friends were dead, and Delly...Sae...they were here too."

"Snow's full of shit, Peeta, or hadn't you figured that out by now?" She leaned back on the mattress. "I'm so tired, and soooo hungry." She looked up at him. "You hungry?"

A childlike grin crossed his face, "The last good meal I ate was in the arena. Oysters...clams..." Peeta licked his lips.

"Don't talk about oysters," Katniss put a hand over her stomach. "I still remember puking that stuff up. Yuck," she stuck her tongue out. Her eyes met his, her arms lifted, "Come lay with me."

"You sure?" He asked, not wanting to lead her on.

"Yeah." Katniss scooted up on the hospital bed until her head rested against the pillow. "When Regina comes back I'll ask her if she can get us some food. You can't bring it out of the dining hall without a doctor's orders," she rolled her eyes. "There are more rules here than you can imagine. Don't be surprised if they tell you when you can pee." She made a motion with her hands calling him to her. "Come here."

Peeta crawled his way up the mattress and placed his head on the pillow next to her. "Is this okay?" His arms were stiff as boards, stuck to the sides of his body. His legs sticking straight out.

"No," Katniss lifted his arm, pressed her head against his beating heart, and placed his free hand on her abdomen. "There, that's much better."

Peeta looked up at the ceiling trying not to let his rapidly beating heart get the best of him. "This is crazy," he said more to himself than to her.

"What is?" She closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of his arms around her.

"This morning I was strapped to a hospital table getting drugs pumped into my veins, and now..." he let out a breath. "It's all so...unreal. Like I'm in the middle of the best dream of my life."

"Is this the best dream of your life?" She placed a kiss against his chin. "If it is, then that's not saying much for our marriage," she let out a little giggle, and snuggled into his chest before realizing what she had said could be misconstrued as a dig at him for his lack of memory. "Oh Peeta," she lifted herself and faced him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay," he pulled her back into his arms. "The only way I'm ever going to remember anything again is if you treat me like you used to, right? I mean...we should just try and go back to life as it used to be, don't you think?"

"I don't know," she honestly didn't. "You know...I meant it when I said we could start over. I wouldn't mind going back to our lunch dates underneath the oak tree. Of course they don't have one here, but there is a really nice elm in the woods."

"Thought you said you couldn't bring food out of the dining hall without a doctor's permission."

"Regina would probably help." Katniss yawned against his chest. Life felt almost...normal laying there with Peeta and talking. "Plus I get snacks during the day to keep in our quarters."

"We have quarters here?" Peeta asked with his brows raised. He had become accustomed to a jail cell, and expected something similar here though he didn't know why.

"Mmm hmmm," she ran her hand up and down the sides of his body. "I can't wait to show you everything I've discovered here," she thought of the hidden bedroom she created for her and Peeta just the night before.

Peeta's hand ran up and down her back. He glanced down at the black uniform she was wearing wishing she was dressed in something a little more...accessible. He thought of how she had ripped the top portion off of herself and pressed her chest against his while they were in the tunnel, and almost asked her to do it again. "This is quite the getup you've got here."

"Yours looks just like it."

"I have one of these?"

"Yup. It's got a spot for everything. Knives, gas mask, body armor...a place for nightlock. The pill not the berry," she said then explained what it was.

"Damn, these rebels have it all figured out, don't they?" Peeta only wished he did. Figuring out what he was doing with Katniss, what he'd be doing for the rebellion now that he was out of Snow's clutches, how he was going to face... "Gale," he said softly. "Why didn't he stop by to say hi like everyone else?"

"I don't know," Katniss shrugged her shoulder. She didn't want to tell him she was glad Gale hadn't showed up. Things were so peaceful now that they weren't speaking of him. "Let's not talk about him, okay? It only upsets you."

"Yeah...sure," Peeta wondered why she wanted to avoid him, and tried to put it out of his mind. "I really am hungry."

Katniss stretched out her legs and got up. "Okay. I'm going to find Regina and get us some food. You stay here." She leaned over the bed and placed a kiss against his cheek. "I'm probably going to change too. You want me to bring you something to wear? I brought your favorite sweats here from Twelve and some of your sweaters...pajamas..."

"Pajamas? Like real pajamas?" The thought of wearing something comfortable was too good to pass up. "Don't suppose I can take a shower somewhere?"

She leaned into him and whispered in his ear, "If you can wait, I've got stuff for that too. I've been hiding our favorite soaps and shampoos so you can wash my hair for me," a coy grin played upon her mouth as she gave him a parting kiss on the lips. "Get some sleep while I'm gone."

"Shampoo her hair," he quietly asked himself once she left the room. He rested his arm against his forehead and gulped. 'Does she want me to take a shower with her?' he asked himself. 'I can't do that. I mean...crap...' His eyes darted back and forth. 'Well you did say you should live life the way you used to. Maybe you used to wash her hair for her.' Still the thought of doing such a thing kept Peeta from getting any rest while Katniss was gone. His mind kept going over the little things he remembered about her, and found himself liking her more and more the longer he spent time with her. Even their argument was sort of, 'Invigorating,' Peeta smiled to himself. 'She's exactly like Effie and Johanna described her. Tough...stubborn...a spitfire.' "Feisty," his bottom lip quirked. "I kind of like that," he said softly to himself. As he was going over the different sides of Katniss he had seen since first discovering her singing in the woods, the echo of her voice and someone else's traveled in through the door to his room the latest nurse left open.

"...you were the one that got me pregnant," he heard Katniss say.

"Are you kidding me?" 'Gale,' Peeta's eyes narrowed dangerously when he realized who it was Katniss was talking to. "Look, I didn't want to cause any trouble. I just wanted to..." his sentence trailed off.

There was silence until Katniss said, "Gale, he's my husband. I told you earlier, he's my responsibility. I'll take care of him."

"I know that!" Gale snapped.

"Then act like it," Katniss snapped back. "Once he's back on his feet...hopefully we'll be able to pick up where we left off," her voice got softer.

"You really think we'll ever be able to do that, Catnip? Now that he's back...now that he thinks these things about me?"

"I hope so," Katniss sounded like she was heartbroken. "I don't want to lose you, Gale, but he needs me."

"Yeah, and the rebellion needs both of you. Now that their Jabberjay is here, they'll need to make sure they get plenty of great footage of the two of you. Just like the Games."

"That's not fair, Gale."

There was pain in Gale's voice when he said, "It was never fair, Catnip. None of this was fair to you." He was quiet then added, "You know what...go to him. He needs you." Gale paused. "I don't." Peeta could swear he heard disgust in Gale's voice. He walked towards the door and peeked out. "I'm not going to sit around waiting for you, Catnip. I've got to move on."

"I know," she looked down between her feet. "I'm sorry, Gale."

"Yeah...well..." he pulled something orange out of his pocket. "I wanted to give this to you before I left."

Katniss looked down at the item in her hand and let out a small huff of laughter before tucking it into the sleeve of the oversized sweatshirt she was wearing. "Thanks."

"I'll miss you, Catnip." Gale reached out and took her hand.

"I'll miss you too," she stood on her tiptoes and hugged him. "Take care of yourself," she kissed his cheek.

Peeta threw the door opened and stepped into the hall. "Is this how it happened in Twelve too!?" He screamed. Fire coursed through him.

"Peeta..." Katniss said in surprise.

"This isn't what you think," Gale defended himself.

"Oh, and what do I think this is, Gale?" Peeta stepped closer to his former friend.

"Katniss told me what Snow did to you Peeta, and I'm here to tell you it was all lies."

"Peeta, please...let's just go back to..." Katniss took hold of his arm, only to have it yanked forcefully away.

"Don't touch me!" Peeta screamed in her face. Fury boiled through his system, and he welcomed it. Peeta's low and hateful growl attacked her, "You almost had me fooled...two timing bitch."

"That's enough of that," Gale stepped between Peeta and Katniss.

"This is none of your business, Hawthorne. This is between me and my...wife," Peeta spat out over Gale's shoulder at Katniss "For all I know that was a lie too. Why the hell would I marry someone like you?"

"You don't know what you're saying Peeta," Katniss looked around the deserted hallway for help before things got out of hand.

*"You know what," Peeta pushed past Gale, "from what I understand, we didn't even have a ceremony. It was some sort of private toasting." The memory of explaining District Twelve's customs during an interview with Caesar before the Quell entered his mind. "Why don't we consider this a **private** divorce."*

"You should go back to your room, Peeta," Gale warned, "before you cross any more lines."

"And you should go to hell!" Peeta's fist cracked him in the jaw causing Gale to fly back and hit his head against the hospital wall.

"You son of a bitch!" Gale yelled as he rushed Peeta.

Peeta's fists were relentless. Invincibility was the word that entered his mind once again as he allowed his rage to flow through his limbs into fists that pummeled at Gale's body. "You were supposed to be my friend!"

"Back off dough boy!" Gale grunted, punched and pushed back.

"PEETA!" Katniss automatically stepped towards them to pull them apart.

The force of Peeta's swing catching Katniss in the shoulder, throwing her into a wall, her body slumping to the ground, barely registered with

him. His fists continued pounding at Gale's flesh. A foot caught a guard rushing towards them in the stomach preventing him from breaking up the fight as Peeta caught Gale in a choke hold. Peeta could feel himself squeezing the life out of the man. A voice in the back of his head was screaming at him to stop, telling him that Gale was a friend, but Peeta's silent words to himself didn't stop him from his brutal attack. It was the thump of something hard striking against the back of his head that finally put an end to their dispute, rendering Peeta unconscious

"Are you sure you're okay?" Peeta asked, looking over Katniss' shoulder at the wall, unable to face her after the things he had done.

"I'm fine." Katniss forced herself not to rub at the sore spot on her shoulder. "I shouldn't have tried to jump between the two of you."

"I shouldn't have..." Tears began to fall as he hid his shame in his hands. Though he was directing his anger at Gale earlier, Peeta had no clue if his next outburst would be directed towards Katniss or not. "You need to go, Katniss. Please leave."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said stubbornly. "Think you can throw a few punches and I'll...what? Run away in fear?" She said roughly, "Well then, you're right...you don't know me at all."

He lifted his face to hers, finally looking her in the eyes. "Why are you here? Don't you understand what I'm capable of?"

"I know exactly what you're capable of." Her voice got softer, "You're the one that seems to have forgotten." She stood up and made her way towards Boggs. "Unlock him."

"Think that's wise?" Boggs stole a peek at Peeta.

"Look at him," Katniss turned to face a forlorn Peeta looking broken and drained. He was the picture of an emotional train wreck. "He won't do a thing to me. He *didn't* do a thing to me out there. I was the one that jumped in the middle of them."

Boggs looked back and forth between the pair then handed her the key. "I'll be just outside the door if you need me."

Katniss tightened her fist over the key. "We won't need you." She waited until Boggs left them alone then dimmed the lights. "Okay," she took the cuff off of Peeta's hand. "Time to talk things out." She set the key on the counter and left the handcuffs dangling on the bed's railing.

"What's left to talk about?" Peeta wiped at his eyes. He didn't blame her if she never wanted to speak to him again.

"Plenty," Katniss gave him a light tap on the thigh. "Get up. You and I are going to work through some things, and there's only one way I know how to do that."

Peeta stood close to the hospital bed, his fingers wrapped around the railing. "How?"

She walked to the bathroom door. "Come on. We're going to take a shower."

"What!?" Peeta's eyebrows shot up. "Are you insane!?"

"Actually, I'm mentally disoriented. I've got a bracelet that says so." She held her wrist out to show him and let out a little laugh. "See? I'm so disoriented I keep forgetting I'm not wearing the damn thing anymore." She waited a few seconds then ordered gently, "Move it. I want to take a shower."

Peeta shuffled his feet hesitantly across the floor towards her.
"Katniss, I don't think this is a good idea."

"Know what your problem is?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You think too much. That's always been your problem. You think things through *waaaaay* too much," she reached out and took his hand, pulling him into the bathroom the second he was within distance. "Of course, I don't think *anything* through. Probably why we make such a good pair." She pulled the shirt he was wearing from the Capitol over his head. "You force me to think with you. I force you to stop thinking with me, and together we come to the perfect conclusion." The sight of various colored bruises against a canvas of pasty white flesh gave her pause. 'Should you really be doing this? Do you think he's strong enough for what you have in mind?' Physically the doctors told her that Peeta's body would be weakened now that the hostile side effects of the drugs weren't causing his adrenaline to take over, and mentally, Katniss knew he was badly damaged, but there was only one way she'd get her Peeta back, and that was to push him. Remind him who he really is, and that she'd love him no matter what. She lifted Peeta's sweatshirt she was wearing over her head and tossed it to the side then turned to face him head on.

"You really should stop this." Peeta's eyes grew wide when he noticed her standing there in pants and a bra. Causing her bodily harm was no longer in the forefront of his mind. The thought of Katniss' naked body was. "I mean...we just met."

Katniss let out a burst of laughter as she reached into the shower to turn it on. "Yeah...okay."

He twisted his face a bit at his stupid statement. "You know what I mean."

"Yup." Katniss unbuttoned her pants and let them drop to the ground. "You think," she faced him, "and you know how I feel about that whole thinking thing...you think," she continued, "...you don't know me, but I'm going to prove to you that you're wrong. That you know me better than you realized. Now drop your pants and get in the shower." Peeta stood unmoving in his spot. "I can take them off for you if you'd prefer," she threatened lightly.

He shook his head. "No, I can do it, but...I'm still not sure we should be doing...I'm not quite sure what we're doing."

"It's called bathing," Katniss kicked the slippers she was wearing to the side, and stepped into the shower with her undergarments on. "Come on."

"We don't have to strip?" Peeta peeked behind the shower's door to see if she was still covered.

"I'd like to. Wearing this stuff in here is exceptionally uncomfortable, but I don't want you running for the hills, so...leave the drawers on and get in."

He took a moment to think this through. 'This is probably normal for her. Well...maybe not wearing underwear in the shower, but everything else is most likely normal behavior. She thinks we're married. But you told her you wanted a divorce,' Peeta blew out a breath of frustration. 'Okay, that was pretty dumb on my part. So make it up to her,' he thought to himself. 'Get in the shower with her.'

"You coming?" She asked impatiently. "The hospital is the only place that has a shower running twenty-four hours a day, but trust me...they'll know if we've used more than our allotted amount of water."

"Um..."

"Geez," she peeked her head out. "I need my hair washed. You coming in or not?"

"Yeah," he swallowed the giant lump that had formed in his throat, and left the remainder of his clothing on the bathroom floor before stepping into the shower. The second he was in there with her he immediately started to apologize for the way he acted and the things he said.

"Katniss I'm sorry abo..."

"Shut up," she put her fingers over his lips to silence him. "This is what we do each night." She bent over and reached for a bottle of shampoo, opened his hand and placed a huge blob of it in his palm. "We don't talk now. We talk later. Right now you wash my hair, then I wash yours." She noticed the look of question. "We're living life the way we used to, Peeta. Just like you said. Now let's get this over and done with because this wet bra is scratching the hell out of me."

Peeta let out a little laugh and said, "Turn around." It wasn't as uncomfortable as he thought it would be, showering with her. They did it in silence, at Katniss' insistence. Washed each others hair, he was amazed at how gentle she was around the lump at the base of his skull, then did their own bathing. Peeta used a bar of soap that had no scent to it, but left him feeling clean for the first time in a long time, and the stuff Katniss squeezed out onto a sponge smelled like heaven. They wrapped towels around themselves, Peeta went into his hospital room, then he put on the pajamas she brought him, but Katniss kept the top, and got dressed in the bathroom.

"Give me your wet stuff." Katniss stuck her arm out of the bathroom door, "I'll hang them up."

"Um...thanks," Peeta gave her his boxers wrapped in a towel.
"Katniss?" he asked through the closed door. "Now what do we do?"

"Bed," she called out to him.

'Bed,' his eyes traveled to the hospital bed and thought, 'That's kind of tiny for two people.'

"Okay," the bathroom door opened to reveal a fresh faced Katniss with damp brown locks hanging around her shoulders. "Braid my hair," she turned her back to him.

He reached out, gathered it in his hands and asked, "Can you leave it down?" The combination of the scent that wafted up from her hair and those freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her perfectly straight nose caused Peeta's insides to quiver in delight.

"Don't remember how to braid my hair?" She asked over her shoulder.

He remembered how to braid, but how did he answer her? "I...uh...no. Don't remember that."

"Okay. I'll teach you how tomorrow," she grabbed her hair and started to plait it.

His hand immediately stopped her. "Can you leave it, Katniss?" He asked again.

She noticed the pleading look in his eyes, remembered how much he liked it when she wore it down at night and said, "Sure. I hate sleeping with it in a braid anyway." The band to hold her hair placed on a counter, she took his hand and led them to bed. "Get in," she gave him the time he needed to join her under the covers.

'Get in,' he repeated her order to himself in his head. 'Nothing happened in the shower so I'm sure this will be fine.' A few deep breaths, then Peeta climbed in next to her, once again lying flat on his back with his limbs as stiff as boards. "Do we talk now?" At this point he'd be grateful for the distraction, because lying next to her this way was attacking his senses.

"Almost," Katniss was on her side facing him. "Roll over, Peeta. Face me."

He closed his eyes for a moment in an attempt to work up the courage, then did what she asked. He was about to say something to her when she threw her leg over his, tangling them beneath the blanket, and cupped his cheeks in her hands.

"Now, we talk," she said as she brushed her nose against his. "This is how we talk things through. Before we go to sleep each night, we do this," she pulled his arm over her waist, then took his face between her hands again. "This is how all of our important decisions...conversations, were had."

Peeta had a very difficult time believing that. "Even after the huge fight we had?"

"Especially after a huge fight." Katniss placed a soft kiss against his jaw.

A shock ran through him at the gentle pressure of her lips against his skin. "How..." he cleared his throat. "How do you concentrate when we're lying this way?"

"It's not easy," Katniss admitted. "Especially now. I've missed you quite a bit, but...talking things through was always very important to

us, and that's the one thing I'm not willing to let you forget. You want to forget our wedding...fine. We can always get remarried."

"Katniss," Peeta stopped her before she could say anything else.

"About that..." With regret in his voice he said, "I shouldn't have said those things to you about wanting a divorce."

"No, you shouldn't have, but you did and now we need to face it."

Katniss pulled slightly away from him and looked him in the eyes. "The way I see it...you don't remember marrying me, so you can't divorce me. Besides, you were wrong when you said we only had a toasting. We were married by the mayor of Twelve."

"Yeah, Prim told me that when she took care of my head earlier."

Peeta gave her a sheepish look. "She was pretty pissed off at me for saying those things to you."

"Prim's always been our biggest fan," a sly grin curled her lips. "I won't ask you if you want to be married to me, because you probably don't know the answer to that, but I will tell you, we are legally married, and you put the paperwork somewhere. Don't ask me where because I have no clue," Katniss answered his question before he could ask it.

"Didn't I tell you where I put it?"

"Nope," she gave her lips a little purse in frustration.

"That was pretty stupid of me," Peeta's hand ran down her hip without realizing it. "Don't know what I could have been thinking."

Katniss quirked a brow, "It was our wedding night. We had other things on our mind."

"Oh," Peeta blushed slightly.

"As far as our marriage goes... I meant it when I said I'd be willing to start over with you. I'd be happy to date you, but don't ask me to be just your friend, because then I'll have to kick your ass."

Peeta let out a little laugh, "I may not remember being married to you, but..." 'Here it goes,' he thought to himself as he took a huge leap in his road to recovery. He rested his head against hers, "...I know I don't want to be just your friend."

It did her heart good to hear him repeat the words he said to her the day he first held her hand. "I, for one, am looking forward to reliving our dates under the oak tree."

"Think it'll be wise to spend time with me without anyone around?" This was still a very big concern for him. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her again.

"Think we'll actually *be* alone?" Katniss asked him. "You know they'll film every second we're together, right?"

He loathed the thought. "They're not filming us now, are they?" He asked with a hint of hope in his voice.

"Doubt it." Katniss ran her fingers through his hair and nuzzled her nose against his neck, taking in the clean scent of his skin. A soft sigh escaped from her lips, "We should take advantage of it. This will probably be the only time we don't have eyes locked on us." There were ears though she wasn't sure if Boggs, who was surely still standing guard outside of the closed hospital door, could hear anything. She lowered her voice down and said, "You heard me talking in the hallway earlier, right?"

"Yeah."

"Through the closed door?"

"One of the nurses left it open when she left." The smell of lavender filled his senses. "God, you smell good."

"I was just thinking the same thing about you," She smiled against his skin.

"Spring," he buried his nose in her hair. "You smell like spring."

"You smell like..." she lifted her eyes to his, "...you."

They held onto each other in silence for a little while before Peeta asked, "When we talked in the past like this, did we fight?"

"Never when we were in bed like this. Why?"

He wanted to ask her a few things, but was a bit nervous about it. "There are some things I need to know, and I was hoping you could help me with them."

Katniss gave him a small nod. "I'll help you any way I can."

"I'm not sure how to start." He gave it some thought then explained what was going through his mind when he attacked Gale. "I have a hard time determining what's real, and what's not real, so when I heard you and Gale in the hallway talking, I kind of...lost it."

"Kind of?" Katniss arched her brow. "Putting it a bit mildly, don't you think?"

"Okay, I lost it." Peeta resigned. "Thing is...before that, I was fine, then images of the two of you kept going through my head. When I hit him...I didn't think we were in the hospital. I thought we were in the woods. I swear, Katniss...I saw trees...heard birds..." Peeta could see

it all over again. "I was certain I had come up on the two of you while you were..." He squeezed his eyes closed trying to push the image from his mind.

"Open your eyes and look at me," she recognized the tension in his body and didn't want him falling back into the same state he was in earlier. "All you have to do is ask me, like you did earlier with your dad...ask me what's real, and what's not, and I'll tell you." She saw the worry on his face. "We can even make a game out of it." She made a mental not telling herself to talk to their friends and family about it so they could do this with him too.

"A game?" He said doubtfully. "Doesn't sound like much fun."

"Maybe not, but it will help." She ran a foot down his calf. "Go ahead and ask me about something you're not sure of, and I'll answer you."

He blew a breath out. "You and Gale...in the hallway...you were hugging him...kissed his cheek. Real, or not real?"

"Real," Katniss said with a straight face. "He was telling me that he'd be leaving Thirteen to join the fight in District Two, and I was saying goodbye."

Peeta thought about Gale's words to her. "So when he said he couldn't wait around for you..."

"He was talking about me joining him in District Two," she answered honestly.

"And when you said that I was your responsibility?"

Katniss' eyes glared, but they weren't directed at Peeta. "He talked to Coin about you, and it pissed me off. He tried to defend your actions while you were at the Capitol."

Hearing this surprised Peeta. "And you didn't want him to defend me?"

"Hell no," Katniss snapped. "I wanted to talk to her. I wasn't about to go in there begging for your forgiveness either. You didn't do a damn thing wrong." Katniss snuggled closer to him, and spoke with a bit of aggression. "I wanted that woman on her knees after all she did...or should I say, didn't do."

"I know what she did, but...what *didn't* she do?" Peeta's leg moved between Katniss'.

"When I think of how long you were at the Capitol...being tortured..." Katniss let out a little grunt, and tried not to think of the wounds on his bare chest. "She could have sent in a team weeks ago, instead she kept postponing it."

"Think she'll send people in there now that I'm out?" Peeta was worried for his friends still there.

"She better," Katniss snapped. "That was part of my deal to become the Mockingjay. Rescue all of you, including Effie Trinket, from the Capitol."

"You included Effie in your conditions to become the Mockingjay?" Peeta smiled a little.

"Of course," Katniss furrowed her brow. "You didn't think I'd leave her behind, did you? That woman is like a mother to you."

That was another thing he wanted to talk about. "Snow tried to convince me she *was* my mother...that she took me in after I relocated to the Capitol."

"Didn't I say Snow was full of shit?" Katniss tightened her arms around his back. "Not the Effie part, but you being a Capitol resident." She rolled her eyes in disgust. "The man has a screw loose."

"So you think it's okay to think of Effie as my mother?"

"Of course I do." Katniss wondered how much he remembered about his own mother. She didn't want to refresh his memory if he had forgotten the things she did to him. "You want to call Effie, mom, then I say, go right ahead. If there's one thing I've learned since seeing the two of you together it's that, the title of mother isn't something a person is owed because they gave birth to you, it's earned. A mom should love you no matter what, and Effie loves you that way."

Peeta squeezed her briefly. "Thanks, Katniss." He kissed her cheek. "You're the first person that hasn't told me she wasn't my mom."

Katniss gave it a second then asked, "Effie Trinket is your mother. Real, or not real?"

Without thinking about it, Peeta followed his heart and said, "Real."

"Damn right that's real," Katniss agreed.

A strange sense of calm engulfed Peeta as Katniss' fingers ran through the hair above his ear. "This is the first time in...I don't know how long, I actually feel like I've got some semblance of control in my life."

She hadn't been thinking about it, but now that Peeta brought it up, "Me too," she had to agree with him. "It's...nice." It was more than nice, but she didn't want to frighten him by telling him how lonely she had been while he was gone, or how much she loved being held by him.

There was one more thing he needed to find out, then, he swore to himself, he'd never ask her about it again. "The baby. Real, or...not real?" Everyone, including the guard that was keeping watch over him, had expressed their condolences for the loss of his child.

"We're not going to start on the whole, Gale's the father shit again, are we?" She wasn't in the mood for it.

"No." Haymitch had really laid into him when he first woke up after fighting with Gale...about the things he had said to Katniss...the nonsense with the baby. The man was his mentor...his neighbor, and from the things Haymitch had told Peeta about him and Katniss...the way they acted together in Victor's Village before leaving for the Quell...the knocks on their front door that were ignored when they were home alone...the telephone that went unanswered more often than not...the television scenes he played on that tiny computer of them on the roof of the tribute center a couple of days before the Quell... "No, I'm pretty sure it was me that got you pregnant, but...it's sort of strange that everyone keeps saying how sorry they are about the baby."

Katniss pulled his face to hers, "I told you that would happen. Hardly anyone knows, Peeta."

"So it's real?"

She pressed the palm of his hand against her bare abdomen, "I told you already...very real."

A thought struck him. "Do you want this baby, Katniss?" His brow furrowed in concern.

She knew he was only trying to combat the suspicions Snow had put into his head, and did her best not to overreact to his questions. "Yes. I want it more than anything."

"Then why would you go to District Eight and put the baby in danger?"

She let her head rest against his for a second then sighed. "You have no idea how hard that was for me. How scared I was when I got back and woke up from my injuries." Her guilt began to cause a tightening in her chest. "I had to be the Mockingjay. It was either stay here and put the baby in danger along with Justus and Regina's, or go to Eight and put only our child in danger."

"Hell of a dilemma," Peeta didn't know what he'd do if he were faced with the same decision to make then it hit him. "You had a list of demands for becoming the Mockingjay, right?"

"Mmm hmm," she gave him an inquisitive look. "Why?"

"Well, they're going to want their Jabberjay fighting on their side now that I'm back." A conniving grin played at the corner of his lip. "Maybe I've got some demands of my own."

"Oooh," Katniss felt a surge of excitement rush through her. "Did I say you thought too much?" Peeta nodded. "I was sooooo wrong. Tell me what you've got in mind."

"Not me," he let his eyes flow to hers. "Us. What we've got in mind." His heart smiled when she caressed his cheek with the palm of her hand and looked lovingly into his eyes. "Our baby...we make decisions together, right?"

"Right," she breathed a sigh of relief when he said the words, 'our baby.'

"Then I say, screw waiting for Haymitch to come up with a plan. They want me, they can have me, but they can't have you, and they sure as hell can't have our baby."

"They'll never agree to that, Peeta." Katniss knew no one would agree to her not keeping up the image of the Mockingjay. "They want both of us."

"Fine," Peeta gave it some thought. "They can have us both, but you don't leave Thirteen. No more dangerous missions. No more visits to Twelve...or any district for that matter."

Katniss liked this idea. "They might go for that, but they're going to ask why."

"Then we'll tell them the truth." Though he felt a rush of determination soaring through him, his tone was tender when he spoke of their baby. "We'll tell them banana nut comes first. I'll go on the missions...I'll do their propos, or whatever they call them. And that's another thing," he was on a roll, "this recording us twenty-four hours a day crap is coming to an end. We'll give them designated hours, and that's it."

"God, I've missed you," Katniss smiled at Peeta's ingenuity.

"What limitations should we give them?" Peeta asked her not knowing what the surveillance was like here in Thirteen.

"For starters, they can stay the hell out of our bedroom."

"Were they in our quarters?"

"No, but I keep thinking about our time at the Capitol and how every second of our time..." Katniss closed her eyes remembering their intimate moments that had been recorded while at the Capitol. "I just don't want them to intrude on our private time together."

"Maybe we should tell them they can't film us while we go on those lunch dates?" Peeta suggested.

"They're never going to go for that either," Katniss grumbled.

"Okay...we'll offer them three days a week and settle for every other day."

"I can live with that," Katniss grinned then nuzzled into his neck. "This is nice isn't it? Being here like this...holding each other..." It felt wondrous to Katniss. Like a dream come true.

The heat of her skin burned through his palm that was still on her belly. He had to pull his hand away from her before he got carried away. "I should probably stop touching you this way, huh?" His fingers stroked back and forth below her navel.

"I don't mind what you're doing." She had missed it so much. Longed for a moment like this from the second she saw him falling from the hovercraft's ladder in the arena. "Does it bother you touching me this way?"

"No," he shook his head, "but I do feel sort of..." he gave his nose a little twitch, "...like I'm crossing some sort of moral line or something."

Katniss arched her brow, "Yes, Peeta. You got me pregnant by feeding me cheese buns," she said dryly.

He let out a little chuckle. "Well then...maybe I should find a kitchen?" He joked and pulled his hand away, then placed it back on her stomach. His hand continued to stroke her skin as her nose brushed back and forth across his chin. Before he knew it, her fingers were mimicking his actions against his stomach. "This feels a little too good, Katniss, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"Oh, I *know* you're not ready for that. Lord, you couldn't even step in the shower with me without wearing underwear."

Peeta let out a louder laugh and said, "First arena. You covered me with a small backpack so you didn't have to see me naked. Real..."

"Shut up." She playfully tapped at the flat of his stomach. "We weren't married then."

"Are we married now? I thought we decided we were just dating," Peeta inhaled deeply when he felt her lips start to travel up the side of his neck.

"Dating...married...fooling around..." She couldn't help herself. She just had to kiss him. "Whatever." Her hungry lips pressed against his reluctant ones.

"We should stop," he said even though that was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"So tell me to stop," Katniss pulled him in for another kiss, only this time he kissed back.

He didn't say a word, just enjoyed the feeling of her hands running over his chest, her foot gliding back and forth across his calf, and her mouth brushing against his. At first he thought the kiss was nice...pleasant, then Katniss pressed herself against him, slid her

tongue between their lips, and Peeta's head began to spin. They had shared kisses like this in the tunnel, but now...under the blankets, with her naked legs entwined with his, the thin layer of the luxurious silk pajama shirt the only thing separating their bare chests...their rapidly beating hearts, and the air between them sizzling like a live wire, Peeta could barely keep his wits about him. His chest tightened. His heart swelled. His hands moved...caressed...had a mind of their own, and then Katniss whimpered into their open mouths and Peeta swore he saw sparks flash behind the lids of his closed eyes. When they finally pulled apart he rested his forehead against hers, tried to control the short bursts of air flowing in and out of his lungs, and asked, "Was it always like this with us?"

"Like what?" She wondered what *'it'* felt like for him.

"Like..." he placed a kiss against the tip of her nose...her cheek...the corner of her mouth... "Amazing," but it was more than that. There was no denying the physical attraction between the two of them, but there was also an emotional charge flowing between them that Peeta couldn't overlook. "Electric," he breathed out in awe against her skin.

"Yeah," she pulled him against her by his hips. "This..." she motioned a finger back and forth between them. "This is the part of us, no one else sees. This is the real Katniss and Peeta that we save for each other."

"I like this version of us very much. Maybe a little too much," he admitted when he felt the uncontrollable racing of his pulse.

"Want me to stop?" She hoped to God he didn't.

He knew he should say yes, but he just couldn't find it in him. "No, but..." he let out a nervous gust of air, "...I think we should be careful not to... I mean the kissing is great, but..." He closed his eyes and

shook his head back and forth knowing he sounded like a complete idiot.

"We won't do anything you're not comfortable with." Katniss nipped at his ear. "In case you're wondering...I'm pretty much comfortable with anything when it comes to you."

"Oh God," Peeta rested his forehead on hers. "You don't play very fair, do you?"

"Nope," she flicked her tongue against his bottom lip. "All's fair in love and war, and since we're currently in a war, and I currently love you..." She could feel his entire body stiffen when she said that. "Peeta, you don't have to say it back." She cradled his cheek in the palm of her hand. "I have enough love for both of us."

An overwhelming amount of guilt surged through him. He could say it, but if he did, she'd think he remembered loving her, and he didn't. "I have strong feelings for you, Katniss, and I'm trying my best to figure them out right now, which is probably why we should stop this." He pulled away from her. "Until I can return these feelings for you..."

"Oh for goodness sake," Katniss pulled him back. "You think you'd be the first guy in history to not let his heart lead the way?"

"You mean with *you*?" His brows shot up.

"No!" Katniss let out a huff of air. "Get it straight Mellark." She pointed an accusing finger at him. "There have been no other guys in my life, but you. You on the other hand..." she gave him a cocky quirk of the lips, "...you've certainly been free with your kisses prior to me."

"I wouldn't exactly say I was free with them," Peeta said lightly. "I mean...there were a few girls, but none that really made a lasting impression." None that he could remember anyway.

"So you say," Katniss teased him. "And please don't tell me you remember them and not me, because then I'll have a little...no, not a little...a pretty huge fit, and I can chalk it up to pregnancy hormones, so you can't do a thing about it."

Peeta let out a burst of laughter. "God it feels good to laugh again."

"It's good to hear you laugh." The humor was gone as electricity flowed between them. They held each other's gaze as Katniss rolled herself on top of him. "Is this hurting your bruises?"

"No," he had no clue why he was letting her do this to him, but he knew he couldn't stop her. If he did, he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

Her hair fell down around their faces as Katniss dipped her head towards his. "One more kiss and then I'll let you push me off of you if you want."

Holy cow did he want, but not to push her off. He let her take charge and closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her body pressing against his. The taste of her lips...the scent of her hair... He didn't stop the kiss, or the next one, or the one after that. He didn't put a halt to her hands running up and down his body, or stop himself from kissing areas of her, he wouldn't have dreamed of unless she asked him to. When she did ask him...he was only more than happy to oblige. Did he remember his love for her? No. Did he love her? If it wasn't love, then he couldn't imagine what it was, because he was pretty sure it was the best feeling he had ever experienced in his whole life.

"Son of a bitch!" The sound of Haymitch's bellowing as he entered their room, the bright white light bringing their current position of Peeta lying on top of Katniss into view, was a bit of a shocker. "Break it up. We need you two in the Command Center."

Katniss glared dangerously at Haymitch. "Now!?" Lord how she hated her mentor's impeccable sense of timing.

"Yeah, now sweetheart," Haymitch answered. "There's a guard out here to escort Peeta there. Let me know when you two are...ready." Haymitch stepped out, and called through the door quite loudly, "HURRY UP AND PUT YOUR CLOTHES BACK ON!"

"Oh my God," Katniss buttoned the top button of her pajamas. "Do I look naked to you?" She hopped out of bed and went for her pants. "I'm dressed. You're dressed," she fumed.

Peeta didn't want to point out that they were barely dressed because she seemed pretty pissed off. He let out a little sniff.

"What?" Katniss glared at him when she heard him make a sound.

"I was just thinking, it's good to know I'm not the only one with a temper around here."

"Oh...bite me," she threw his sweatshirt she wore earlier in his face.

Peeta let out a burst of laughter and pulled it over his head. He really enjoyed the many sides of Katniss she had shown him that day. The guard handcuffed one of Peeta's wrists to the wheelchair for his own safety. When Katniss had a fit, the guard informed them that Gale would be attending the meeting, and Peeta said flatly, "Cuff me."

"Peeta," Katniss began to argue with him, but stopped when she remembered how badly things turned out the last time they saw each other. The last thing she needed was for Peeta to attack Gale in front of President Coin. "Will you at least keep one hand free?"

"I'd rather not," he said seriously. He held it up to her, "Want to hold it?"

"Yes," she nodded, and worried with each step they took towards the Command Center. "So why are we going to command?" Katniss asked Haymitch.

"There's a broadcast playing, and our friends narrating it," there was an unmistakable tone of anguish in Haymitch's voice. "Coin wants the two of you there."

"Have they shown Effie?" Peeta asked, wondering what happened to her after he abandoned her and raced for his freedom.

"Not yet, but if they do...Plutarch can rewind it."

The usual gathering of Thirteen's elite rebels, and the Capitol's film crew were gathered in the Command Center watching and listening to the familiar voices of Annie Cresta, Johanna Mason and Effie Trinket.

"Did ya see Effie yet?" Haymitch asked the second he walked into the room

"Not yet," Plutarch answered then greeted both Katniss and Peeta. "Good to see you two together again."

'Yeah,' Katniss thought to herself, 'I'm sure you're *all* relieved that the Star-Crossed Lovers are back together again.' Her eyes lifted to Gale

who had a small knot on his chin and a split bottom lip. 'Okay, maybe not all.'

Peeta knew he should probably apologize to Gale for earlier, but watching...listening for Effie was much more important than anything else at the moment. He squeezed Katniss' hand in his as they heard Johanna and Annie describing the damage the war was causing in each district. The destruction in Four. The trees that had burned down in Seven. The factories in Eight that no longer existed. Never once was there a mention of the people the Capitol's army had murdered during the fighting, only how the rebels had died of their own accord. Effie's voice was speaking as scenes were shown on the television screen, but the woman had yet to be seen. 'Come on...come on...' Peeta's head was reeling. 'Show her.'

And like that the image of Effie Trinket lit up the screen. Capitol wig in place, makeup to match. Pursed lips, a quirked brow. Her ankles in irons. Her hands cuffed in her lap. Effie looked straight into the camera, "Please my darlings," everyone knew who she was talking to. "My sweet boy, Peeta...my fiery girl, Katniss... there in Thirteen...dead by morni..." Effie was toppled to the floor by an unseen force, her wig knocked off of her head.

Peeta could sense the rage coursing through him at the sounds of Johanna, Annie and Effie's cries of pain. He released Katniss' hand and squeezed the arm of the wheelchair until his knuckles went white from lack of blood flow. The anger he had felt when he attacked Gale was nothing compared to the rage currently taking over his system.

The voice of President Snow called out, "Cut the feed!" A loud female yelp, no one knew who it belonged to, cried out in desperation. The last thing anyone saw was blood spraying across the camera's lens as the screen faded to black.

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 12: Used and Abused, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Eleven: Used and Abused

Well, readers...I was going to post this when I was done writing chapter twelve, but it's my birthday today so I thought I'd give you all a gift and post it early.

Since my last chapter was pretty much a continuation of K/P's reunion, this one is HUGE! Thank you so much to my betas who continue to give of themselves, and all they get in return are some recipes for crumb cake and balsamic glazed pork loin from me. S and A, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

If you have questions regarding this story or any others, feel free to follow me on tumblr. [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com). You'll usually get info on there about my story and sneak peeks into the newest chapters. And if you have a question that you **MUST** have answered, that's where I'll answer it.

So, is anyone wondering what's happening in the world of...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Effie sat in one of the familiar rooms President Snow used to question his prisoners, waiting patiently. Her hands were cuffed to the chair as were her ankles. A Peacekeeper stood next to her, and Effie immediately took notice of the bump next to his boot, the gun at his waist, the club they used to beat anyone that looked at them the wrong way and began rehashing the ways to disarm the man like Mr. Tanner had taught her only hours earlier. Though she was concerned for Steven's well-being, Peeta was the prominent figure in her mind. She wondered if he was safe in the arms of Katniss, and how she was handling Peeta's failing memory of her. 'Do not be concerned, Effie,' she thought to herself, 'Katniss will help him to remember.' She was thankful her plan to get Peeta out of Snow's clutches was a success. If they had returned to the Capitol together, there would be nothing left of her darling boy. He would have been turned into a killing machine for the Capitol. His target...Katniss.

"Dr. Avalon, do you think it's wise to be giving Peeta tracker jacker venom prior to my being alone with him in District Twelve?" Effie asked as they prepped Peeta for their trip.

"This is jacker juice," the doctor plunged a syringe into Peeta's vein. "We wouldn't want him to have another episode like he had yesterday. Withdrawal can be deadly when it comes to this particular drug unless

handled with care, and we wouldn't want him to die when he's almost where we need him to be."

Effie couldn't help but wonder what they had planned for Peeta, "And where do you need him to be exactly?"

The doctor checked Peeta over after he let out an almost grateful sigh, "Very good." The lecherous grin on the physician's face turned Effie's stomach. "I have been weaning Peeta off of the jacker juice...replacing it with the actual tracker jacker venom, however I agree with you in your assessment of our prisoner. Treating him with the actual venom prior to his trip could have an adverse reaction." The doctor tossed the needle he used on Peeta into a small trash disposal container that ground it into miniscule bits almost instantly. "Once he returns we will give him another treatment of the actual venom...tell him the destruction he saw while touring his former district was due to Katniss."

"How will that work? Will he believe you?" Effie could only hope Peeta would be able to fight the venom if her plan to get him out didn't work.

"Oh yes," the doctor said proudly. "Between the recordings we've shown to him of Katniss and Gale, walking amongst the corpses of Twelve, and the venom, it shouldn't be difficult at all. By my estimations, one more dose will wipe the memories of he and Katniss' relationship, two more doses of venom will turn Peeta completely against her...against the rebellion. Not only will we be able to use him to execute Katniss, we should be able to use him to get rid of any rebel soldiers as well...if they haven't killed him by then." He gave Peeta a pat on the arm. "How are you feeling Peeta?"

His eyes were closed, his head a little wobbly, "Fine...good."

Effie stared at Peeta, hiding her concern for him, and asked, "Do you know where you are?"

"Yeah," Peeta licked his lips. "I'm in the Capitol."

"I've given him enough to last between eight and nine hours, but not enough to overcome his mental faculties. We want him to be very aware of his surroundings." The doctor motioned to a Peacekeeper. "He'll be fine while in your care though I'd keep very close tabs on him. There is still a chance of him having side effects to the drug." He reached out and patted Effie's hand in a friendly manner. "Not to worry Miss. Trinket...I wouldn't put you in any danger." The physician handed Effie a syringe. "If he has signs of withdrawal, give this to him. It must be injected into his bloodstream, but do not give it to him before the eight hour time window is up or it might cause severe violent outbursts."

"Well, I wouldn't want to do that," she took the needle with the jacker juice in it and placed it in her jacket pocket. "Thank you, Dr. Avalon." She turned to Peeta and Mr. Tanner. "Shall we?"

Once in the elevator Effie slipped the needle into Peeta's pants pocket, and gave him a small smile. "Hopefully we'll be back before any episodes occur, but just in case, the doctor gave me something for you. A shot in the vein and you'll be right as rain."

"Make sure you keep it away from him, Miss. Trinket," Mr. Tanner gave her a friendly warning, unaware that Peeta was already carrying the drug. "I don't want him getting a hold of it and using it against anyone."

"Of course, Mr. Tanner. Do you think I'm a fool?" Effie harrumphed and gave Peeta a little wink.

Effie didn't know how much time had passed since Peeta was given the shot, but she hoped and prayed that her boy wasn't going through any signs of withdrawal. If he was in Thirteen then surely Dr. Valero would be treating him and finding a way to free him of the addiction Effie felt she had caused.

"Miss. Trinket," President Snow entered the room. His eyes were filled with rage, his cheeks pasty white with splotches of red, and a small drop of blood dried in the corner of his mouth. "Imagine my surprise when I was told our prisoner escaped, and *you* were the reason why." Snow ran his hand over the back of her chair. "All this time I thought it was Peeta who formed some sort of...sick bond with his escort, and now the truth has finally come to light." He snarled, "The feelings were mutual." Snow lifted his head, his nostrils flaring, a look of utter disgust scrawled across his face. "I was certain you would have more sense than to fall for that mongrel's trickery."

Effie arched one brow, "The only mongrel I know is standing before me." If Effie was right, now that Snow knew about the personal bond she had with Katniss and Peeta he would use her much as he had used Peeta against Katniss as an emotional weapon. The smack she received across the side of her face didn't come as a surprise. Her goal in coming back to the Capitol was to direct Snow's anger at her, not the others still in captivity. If that meant antagonizing the man, then so be it. Effie remembered Johanna's tough edge when the Peacekeeper hit her, and licked the blood off of her lips. "You're much weaker than I expected. I suppose tha..." another smack, this time with the back of Snow's hand across her cheek. Snow shook his hand out a bit. "I think you may have injured yourself more than me. Perhaps you should seek medical attention," she said with a stiff upper lip doing her best to hide the radiating pain shooting across her cheek. "If you recall, I was a punching bag for Viggo..." Effie gave Snow a conniving look, "...he prepared me for moments such as this

when he talked me into joining the rebellion." Though the man was dead, it was important that Snow still believe Bettes was a traitor. There were still identities to protect within the Capitol.

Snow gripped the handles of her chair and leaned his face into hers, "Why are you provoking me, Miss. Trinket? I despise this sort of barbaric treatment."

"Yes, I'm sure you do," Effie held his stare. "You'd prefer it if someone else did your dirty work for you."

Snow held her by the chin, digging his fingers into her flesh, his hate for her written all over his face. "I trusted you...made you a part of my inner circle...provided you with the opportunity to become something more than an escort for the lowest form of creatures on earth, and this is how you thank me for all that I've given to you?!" He threw her face to the side.

Effie's expression quickly feigned remorse. "When you put it that way...I really must think of another way to express my gratitude to you." She quirked the corner of her lip the way Haymitch did when he flashed his cocky grin. "I have a wonderful idea, why don't you hand me a dagger and I can slit your throat? I believe that would be an extraordinary way to say thank you for what you've done." Being on this particular end of questioning was not Effie's forte so she continued to channel her friends strengths. Haymitch's cocky attitude, Johanna's fierce determination, Peeta's endurance, Katniss' fiery temperament, and both of her kid's courage. "What do you want from me? You know I won't tell you anything about the rebellion, so why bother with this unless you enjoy beating women."

"You are no woman! You are a rebel spy," his growl was low and deep. "You are barely even human." Snow's chest was moving up and down

as he breathed, like he had just run some sort of race. "We will find him, and when we do, he will watch us skin you alive."

"Find who?" Effie said as light as day thankful that Mr. Tanner's plan to drain the Capitol's hovercraft of power prohibited them from making too many trips over District Twelve in search of Peeta. "Oh, Peeta? No you shan't. He's gone. They've taken him back to Katniss...where he belongs, and don't worry about his memory of her...he still has very strong emotional ties to her," at least Effie hoped he did. "The two of them are probably curled in each others arms by now lying in the safety of their quarters." Effie's sweet tone when speaking about Katniss and Peeta was obviously infuriating President Snow, but that didn't stop her. "I can see them now, she's resting her head against his chest like she always does, he's wrapped his arms around her...keeping his wife and child secure."

"Secure?" Snow leaned over her. "Allow me to show you how secure they are, Miss. Trinket." He pulled a control out of his pocket and began speaking. "I want bombers. Coordinate an attack on District Thirteen." Effie's gasp caused Snow to quirk a brow at her. "Oh, yes, Miss. Trinket. I'm well aware of where they are hiding."

"Thirteen no longer exists," Effie said as convincingly as she could.

"The dredges of Thirteen live underground like vermin. They have kept to themselves for three quarters of a century and I've over looked them...their almost defiant way of surviving when they should have been dead, but now it's time to rid this country of the pests that threaten to infest it."

A voice called out through a speaker, "President Snow, we can have all of our bombers gathered and ready to go by nightfall."

"Get it done," Snow ordered then turned to Effie. "Miss. Trinket, you had an opportunity to put an end to this war, yet you chose to help in fanning the fire that's spreading across our nation." He grabbed the back of her hair by her bun, and yanked so she'd stare him straight in the eyes. "The blood of those living in Thirteen is now on your hands." He released her forcefully, and took a seat. "Now, what do you say we have some tea, and discuss your punishment for being a treasonous rat?" He snapped his fingers and an Avox appeared with a tray laden with delicacies, a pot of tea and cups. The Avox poured two cups, then Snow dismissed her with a wave of his hand. He pulled a small vile out of his inside jacket pocket and poured it into Effie's tea. "Don't worry my dear," he said to Effie when her eyes grew wide with horror, "I'm not going to kill you...today. If I wanted to do that, I would have injected it into your bloodstream. The poison is slow acting...causes terrible pain in your extremities. You will most likely be begging me to kill you by nightfall, but..." his lips formed a bloodcurdling smile, "...I am a kind man...compassionate. Killing someone like yourself, a brilliant rebel mind able to pull the wool over my eyes, so quickly, would be a complete waste to me. Instead, I plan on making you suffer..." he lifted the tea to her clamped lips as she struggled to keep them closed. Peacekeepers held her head in place, digging their fingers into her cheeks, forcing her mouth open. "Tell me all about the rebel's plans and I promise, I shall make your death swift." The first of the tea went into her mouth, dripping down the sides of her face.

"President Snow, sir." The door to the torture chamber was thrown open. "Rebel forces are cutting into our broadcast again, and sir...we believe we've detected life signs in Twelve."

The cup at Effie's lips was set back down on the tray as she spit out as much of the tea as possible. "Signs of life, you say?" Snow leered at Effie, "Perhaps I pulled my search party out too soon."

"Your men are wrong. I watched them take him away." Effie glared back at Snow, the inside of her mouth burning and a slight twinge in her stomach from the little bit of poison that entered her system.

Snow looked to his guards, "Throw her in Peeta's cell until further notice." He picked up his cup of tea and sipped. "Looks like you've been temporarily reprieved, Miss. Trinket. Once I find that boy, we shall skin you like an apple. I do so like an audience."

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Listening to Catnip sing, watching her hold onto that locket that Peeta gave to her, seeing her cup her hand over her stomach, and crying, broke Gale's heart. He wished he could take her pain away. Almost wished Peeta was dead so she could move on with her life, instead of being tortured in the Capitol. He'd rather pull the guy out of there, but Coin told him earlier in the day that they were postponing the rescue mission once again, and he wasn't allowed to tell Katniss. When she asked if she could meet them in the village, Gale didn't want to let her go off on her own. His first instinct was to say, no, but then he saw her face...that lost look in her eyes...the way she held onto the locket, and knew she needed to mourn. He hoped she would finally come to grips with the loss of her child, and Peeta being absent. If she did, then Coin was planning on calling the rescue mission off completely. Another thing Gale wasn't allowed to tell Katniss. He would have broken his word to President Coin if he hadn't agreed with her. Going

to the Capitol and getting the rebels out was too risky, and now that Peeta went on television and spoke against the rebellion again... It was time to cut ties. Gale had lost too many friends in the bombing of Twelve to let one more death get the best of him. People he had been a lot closer to than Peeta were dead now because of President Snow, so he didn't allow the pain of Peeta's capture to get to him. Besides, he needed to be strong if he was going to help Katniss through losing the guy. Gale walked up to Plutarch, pointed to the cameras and asked, "Are those things off?" The cameraman named Pollux nodded and flipped a switch cutting the red power light. "Plutarch," he held his hand out for the man to take a few steps away from their group, "can I have a word?"

"Of course," Plutarch followed him. "What can I do for you?"

"Not for me, for Katniss. She needs to spend some time alone." Gale looked out to the distance and said out loud what he was hoping in his heart, "I think she's finally coming to the realization that Peeta's gone...that he's not coming back." Plutarch had been in on the meeting with Coin that morning and knew what Gale was speaking about. "There's a safe passage here."

"Yes, I'm aware of it, but I have no clue as to its precise location," Plutarch said.

"I'm sure Katniss knows." Gale wondered, "If we led her to the spot where she could get access to it, could we let her go on her own to Victor's Village?" Gale saw Plutarch's hesitation. "This might be the best thing for her. Let her say goodbye to Peeta...to their baby, and move on with her life. Maybe then she'd be more willing to do what's necessary for the rebellion."

Plutarch nodded, "Yes...yes, you may be correct." He tapped at the edge of his computer then said, "Yes, okay. I'll agree as long as she stays in contact with us the entire time."

"I'm sure she will," Gale gave the man a pat on the shoulder. "I'll let her know."

There was a look of shock on Katniss' face when Gale told her what she was allowed to do, then walked ahead of the group right next to her. "Thanks, Gale. Don't know what you said to Plutarch, but I'm grateful. I really needed some time to myself."

"Need to say goodbye?" He asked almost suggestively.

"Goodbye to who?" Katniss stepped over a rock.

"Peeta? Your baby?" Gale lifted a hanging branch out of his way.

Katniss gave him a strange look. "Why would I say goodbye to them?"

He hated doing this, but it was what she needed to hear. "Katniss, you're moods have been all over the map since you lost the baby and Peeta. Don't you think it's time to let them go?"

Katniss stopped, crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

"No. No I don't. Do *you* think it's time I let them go?"

"Yeah. I do." Katniss didn't respond to him, she just turned and headed towards their destination. "I know it's painful to hear, but it's time Catnip. Peeta isn't doing too well...how much longer do you think he's going to last?" Still Gale waited, and got no answer in return. "I miss him too, you know? He was my...my friend."

"Is that why you're so willing to write him off now?" She asked harshly.

"I'm not writing him off, I'm facing the truth." Gale finally confessed, "I'm not sure that Coin is going to go through with the rescue mission in the Capitol after the things Peeta has said."

"I was wondering how long it would take her to go back on her word. She's very good at that."

"She hasn't gone back on her word, Catnip."

"Gale, do me a favor, stop defending that woman to me," Katniss snapped. "I'm sick of it. Sick of her." Katniss reached out and picked up the hand that Gale wore his communicuff on and said, "You may want to inform our fearless leader that if she doesn't get Peeta and Effie out of there soon, I'm sticking to my word and hanging up my Mockingjay uniform. Now," she dropped Gale's wrist, "if you don't mind...I'd like to walk in silence."

"I'm getting really sick of this, Katniss."

"Sick of what? Me not wanting to put up with Coin's bull?" She let out a huff of laughter, "That shouldn't surprise you in the least."

"No, this attitude you've got towards me. Snapping at me all the time...thinking I don't care about you."

Katniss didn't say a thing for a few minutes then asked him, "If we just met, would you choose me as your friend?"

Gale thought about it for a second then answered honestly, "Not a friend...maybe something more than that."

"Why?"

"Why not?" He shrugged her question off.

"I'm serious Gale. Why would you want something more with me?"

Did he really have to answer her? He glanced over at her blank expression and said, "You know why, Catnip."

She nodded absently and said, "You think you love me."

"I do love you. I know it's not the same thing you and Peeta had, but that doesn't mean I don't care about you."

"Okay," Katniss said conversationally. "Let's say you do love me...and let's say I loved you back... Would you leave me in Snow's hands?"

Gale knew what she was getting at, and answered, "I already did. Every time you left Twelve and went to the Capitol...to the Games, I left you in his hands."

"It's not the same, Gale. You didn't have any way of helping me then, but...let's say you did have a way of helping me, would you have?"

He stared straight ahead and finally admitted, "Yeah."

"Yeah," she repeated.

"I'll talk to Coin...plead Peeta's case or something," Gale offered.

"Don't," Katniss grabbed onto his arm to prevent herself from tripping, then let go. "I don't want you to say a thing. She made a promise to me, and if she doesn't live up to it, then I'm the one that should handle it. Peeta's my husband...he's my responsibility, and I'll take care of him. I'm tired of everyone around me trying to fight my battles for me without my knowledge. Sometimes I think all of you have forgotten I survived two arenas. I'm not made of glass."

"Well, if you need someone to talk to her..."

"I have Haymitch. He'll fight like hell for Peeta and Effie to be rescued." Katniss stopped next to a group of willow trees and Gale could've sworn her eyes filled up with tears.

"You okay, Catnip?" He looked around to see what could have upset her.

"Yeah," she looked straight ahead and continued on her way. "That spot...Peeta and I threw down a blanket one morning and watched the sunrise before we went to the Quell."

"You did?"

"Yeah," Katniss' expression softened. "He described it for me...the colors of the sunrise...the colors of Peeta's Sunset..." She sighed.

"Peeta's Sunset?" Gale thought it sounded familiar then remembered where he saw the name. It was sewn into a garment he had stuffed in his old clothes pocket. "Uh...hey, Catnip," his whole face turned red. "I think I have something of yours."

"What?" She looked like her head was in the clouds.

"Peeta's Sunset," Gale said sheepishly.

"What!?" Katniss halted her tracks. "YOU..." her eyes were wide open.

"Prim pulled out a blanket from a box and it fell out. I shoved it in my jacket...I didn't think she should be looking at that."

"Oh my God," she hid her face behind her hands and her shoulders started to shake.

"Don't cry. I'm sorry. I should have given it back the second I saw you, but I really didn't know how to..." The sound of her laughter floated

through the air. "You're laughing?" Gale let out a little burst of laughter too. "Would you stop doing that to me? I keep thinking your crying and you're laughing."

"Oh my God," Katniss put her hand over her stomach. "I can't believe you have that!" She smacked his shoulder. "Pig," she teased him. "I want my drawers back."

He grinned at her. "Don't worry. I'll get them for you when we get back to Twelve."

"Hey," she turned to him, "How'd you know they were named Peeta's Sunset?"

"It's on the label inside."

"It is?" Katniss bit her bottom lip. "I don't remember seeing the names sewn into any of the others," she said absently.

"There are more?" Gale gave her a nudge, "Lucky guy that Peeta."

"Go to hell, Gale," She chuckled.

They walked for a few more minutes in silence until Gale said, "We still fighting?"

"I don't think so." She put her arm through his. "The strangest things seem to be pulling me from my sour moods since..." she faltered then said, "...since I was in the arena with Johanna and she told me she called Peeta Cinnamon Buns."

Gale let out a laugh after finding out what it meant. "And you thought Dough Boy was bad?" It felt remarkably good to be on speaking terms with her again. "Yeah," he said, "I'd choose you to be my friend,

but...and don't get mad at me after I say this, I'd probably choose Peeta first. He's such an easy going guy."

"Yeah, I'd choose him first too. Though he's not as easy going as you think. The man can fight."

"Oh, I know...I saw the Games."

"No, I meant with me. We've had some doozies. Puts yours and mine to shame," Katniss said it like she missed it.

"Like I said, I've seen the Games," Gale glanced down at her. "He never puts up with your shit, Catnip."

"Nope," she said proudly. "I love that about him."

"You hate it about me," Gale teased.

"That's because you should just cave into me at all times like a real best friend would." She grinned. "There it is," she pointed the rock out. "You guys should head to Victor's Village." Katniss started on her way then turned back, "Hey, do me a favor, grab Peeta's blank canvases for me. I forgot them the last time I was here, and they're too bulky for me to carry."

"Yeah, sure." He stole a glance at the flat rock that masked a storage unit and asked, "Guess I'm not learning how to get into it, huh?"

"Nope. If I show you then Plutarch's going to want to film it." Katniss looked over her shoulder at the film crew. "Go occupy their time or something while I disappear."

"Sure thing," He gave her hand a pat. "Be careful."

"Gale there's nothing in there but dirt and synthetic fire."

"You have no idea if some rodents or...pests got in there."

"If I come across any pests, I'll make sure to shoot them and bring them back for dinner." Katniss gave her bow a pat.

"Don't do that," Gale stepped away from her. "I'd rather have venison stew instead of rat stew."

"Mole casserole," Katniss called to him from over her shoulder.

"Skunk soup!" Gale laughed. "See ya, Catnip," he lifted his chin in departure, and turned to Plutarch's group. "Okay guys, time to head to Victor's Village. Plutarch can that hovercraft pick us up?" Gale pointed into the distance, "There's an area...a cliff that way. It's got a large clearing so the hovercraft can land."

"Can't we just walk to the village?" Cressida asked.

"It'll take a couple of hours for us...traveling through the woods and stuff, but Katniss will probably be there in about an hour. She's got a straight path there."

Plutarch looked over Gale's shoulder. "Where is she?"

Gale looked behind him. "She's safe. You should check and make sure we have communications with her though."

Plutarch spoke into his device, "Are you able to hear me, Katniss?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'll call you when I'm in Victor's Village."

"Shall we?" Plutarch gestured for Gale to lead the way.

"We should've given something to Katniss before she left," Gale spoke of the cheese sandwiches and bottles of water they were consuming. It hadn't even crossed his mind that she might be hungry or thirsty.

"She'll be fine. We'll be meeting up with her in roughly... Did you say something Katniss?" Plutarch could've sworn she spoke to them.

"No, just talking to myself," She answered.

Their entire hovercraft went silent when the sound of Peeta's voice coming over Plutarch's computer was followed up with Katniss saying his name through their earpieces.

"Was that?" Gale looked up to Plutarch's startled expression. "Holy shit, that's Peeta!" They could hear Katniss and Peeta saying a few things to each other then were accosted with all too familiar noises.

Plutarch began speaking into the device, "Katniss, did we hear you right? Is Peeta with you?" He turned to the pilot, "I thought this area was swept for signs of life?"

"It was, sir," the pilot answered while tapping at his control panel. "They did a sweep of the area last night, and less than hour before we arrived."

"Is that really him!?" Gale started calling out to Katniss through the earpiece, but she wasn't responding.

"I'm not detecting any Capitol crafts in the area, sir," the pilot spoke. "Our anti radar is fully functional, so they shouldn't be able to detect us if they are here."

"Wouldn't they have anti radar as well?" Gale was growing more and more worried.

"We disabled those capabilities prior to our escape from the Capitol." Plutarch answered. Gale began to lose control, but Plutarch silenced him. "Soldier Hawthorne, I am trying to determine if this is actually Peeta, or an altered recording of his voice, please silence yourself."

"They're not talking," Cressida said as the unmistakable sounds of two people kissing one another echoed through their earpieces.

"Wow," Peeta's voice was heard.

"Yeah...wow," Katniss responded.

"Give me a second while I check this for authenticity," Plutarch told them. Within a minute his face lit up, "That's him. That's Peeta!"

Everyone on board the craft called out in celebration, but Gale. "This could be a trap. How do you know there's not Peacekeepers down there?" But his concern was blown aside by those around him. "Is anyone listening to me!?"

"Gale," Plutarch seemed to be thrilled with the current situation, "if there were Peacekeepers down there, we would have heard them by now. They're not the quietest of sorts."

Cressida's entire face lit up, "My goodness! Our Mockingjay and Jabberjay have been reunited! We must notify President Coin immediately."

"Shouldn't we confirm it first?" Gale suggested. "Snow could be using Peeta as bait for a trap to capture Katniss."

"Such a smart young man," Plutarch's voice sounded condescending to Gale. "You were a coal miner in Twelve, yes?"

"Yeah," Gale answered wondering what his former profession had to do with the situation at hand.

"What a waste." Plutarch drank from his water bottle like he was sipping a cup of tea.

"Um...don't you people think we should be trying to get a hold of Katniss?" Gale was eager to find out if she was with Peeta, and no one else seemed to be concerned that this could be a trap.

"Of course." Plutarch began speaking to her. "Katniss, did we hear you correctly? Is Peeta with you?" They waited and got no response.

"Catnip?" Gale's voice was urgent. "Catnip!?" His eyes flashed open when she didn't respond. "We need to go back!"

"Calm down, Gale," Plutarch had a look on his face like he knew something Gale didn't.

"She's not answering!" Gale was tempted to shake some sense into the man.

Plutarch pressed a few buttons on his computer and amplified the sounds of Katniss' microphone. "Katniss is...busy," there was a hint of humor in his voice when he said it.

Gale listened closely to the sounds coming through his earpiece, and his face flushed when he heard her let out a, "Dear God," that sounded like a woman in the throes of passion.

The sounds got muffled, and Plutarch's adjustments did nothing to help. "Can you hear them?" Cressida asked.

Plutarch looked as though he were struggling. "Only a few sounds, but I don't think we need to worry. Sounds to me like they're just getting

reacquainted," a smile of pleasure crossed his lips. "Pilot, have you detected any other hovercrafts in the area?"

"No, sir."

"Any life signs in Twelve?" Plutarch asked.

"I can't even find Katniss and Peeta's life signs. Wherever they are, their signals are masked."

"Wonderful!" Plutarch's exuberance was annoying the hell out of Gale. "We'll need to rework the latest propos, Cressida," Plutarch began rambling on and on about the different ways they could work the footage they had gotten that day.

Gale was tempted to pull the earpiece from his ear, the muffled sounds of two lovers being reunited was a bit much to take, but someone needed to make sure Katniss was safe, and the group on the craft was too busy discussing how exciting it was that their lovebirds were back together again. He was grateful when they landed in Victor's Village, but surprised there were no signs of Snow's army searching for Peeta. He excused himself the second the steps were in place, and headed for Katniss' house to get Peeta's blank canvases leaving the rest of his group standing next to the hovercraft. The second he entered their house he was accosted with the memory of his family spending the night there. The bond he had forged with Peeta had taken Gale by surprise back then. Gale gathered as many paint supplies as he could, shoving them inside of an empty box then folded up the wooden easel and shoved it under his arm. His eyes scanned the room for blank canvases, then he saw the large crate and looked inside. "Damn," Gale couldn't believe how many blank canvases were inside of it, and briefly wondered what it was like to have disposable income to spend on something so frivolous.

The muffled sound of Peeta's voice saying, "I can't," perked Gale's ears up.

"Peeta?" Gale called, but got no answer. He made two trips to the hovercraft and kept his ears peeled to the conversation that began between Katniss and Peeta. Though it sounded like Katniss was holding her hand over the microscopic mouthpiece attached to her listening device, Gale could understand everything that was being said which meant everyone on the hovercraft was probably glued to it too.

"...shame we didn't fit her with a camera before she went down there," Gale walked into the hovercraft in the middle of Plutarch's sentence.

"We've still got audio," Cressida said with hope. "Maybe Beetee can clear it up? We did record it."

Plutarch's eyes picked up when Peeta said, "No. Not yet. I need to feel you...just let me feel you."

Gale closed his eyes trying to ignore the sound of Katniss' begging, "Touch me. I need to feel you too...feel your heartbeat against mine." Then followed up with, "You're home. You're home."

"I'm home," Peeta's voice cracked.

"That's it!" Plutarch called out. "My God these two are priceless!" He licked his lips.

Cressida moved closer to Plutarch, "We should get them to reenact this in the woods of Thirteen. Can you imagine what this would do for the country's morale?"

Gale couldn't help but notice how none of them commented on Katniss telling Peeta she loved him. 'God, these Capitol people don't

even realize the importance of his homecoming to her,' he glared at Plutarch and Cressida.

"...she's such a horrible actress though," Gale picked up on Cressida's comment mid sentence. Katniss and Peeta's conversation was quickly being ignored by the Capitol crew as well as Gale.

"Yes, but *he's* a wonderful actor. Magnificent. Honestly, I was almost disappointed he didn't join Caesar as a co-host. Peeta's so photogenic, and an exceptional wordsmith."

"If only she had an ounce of his talent on camera." Gale wanted to smack Cressida. "She's brilliant when she's unscripted, but..."

An evil grin crossed Plutarch's face, "Then let's get their unscripted reunion."

"What do you have in mind?" Cressida stared at Plutarch's computer as his fingers flew across the screen. "Oh my," Cressida's eyes were aglow. "That's perfect. Shall I have the pilot contact Fulvia?"

"We should inform our leader first." Plutarch looked to Gale. "I think it's safe to inform President Coin now, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah." Gale could have sworn he heard something crackling over the pilot's radio. "What was that?" He stood up and made his way towards the pilot.

"I'm not sure," the pilot reached for a few buttons and pressed at them. "Probably just some radio static."

Gale kept his spot next to the pilot, not wanting to sit with the rest of his group, and continued to listen to the conversation filtering through his earpiece.

"...you were in the woods with him...he cradled your cheeks and asked you how I kissed you," Peeta sounded like he was hurting. "Then he...he kissed you. First a light peck, then a...much more involved kiss. Good God, Katniss, when I saw Gale doing that to you...I wanted to wring his neck."

"What did he say?" Gale's brows shot up. His eyes darted to the back of the craft and saw several sets of eyes glaring at him. The group continued to listen as Peeta spelled out the details of his torture to Katniss.

"Gale?" Plutarch called to him. "Join us, won't you?"

He honestly didn't want to, but still he replied, "Yeah." Gale took his seat and waited for the obvious question.

"Is there any merit to what Peeta is saying?" The corner of Plutarch's mouth twitched. "Not that anyone has the right to tell you and Katniss how to live, but you must understand how important those two are to the rebellion. Word of your affair must not leak out."

"Affair!? Katniss and I never had an affair. We never had anything."

"Those recordings were a fake, Peeta," Katniss' comment instantly backed up Gale's statement. "Gale and I...those things never happened."

"See?" Gale practically snarled at the group. "Nothing happened between us...ever."

"Well, that's a relief," Plutarch seemed to accept it now that Katniss had denied the accusations.

No one said a word until Katniss said, "I should probably get dressed."

"Don't rush on my account," the sound of Peeta's voice brought laughter to everyone on board, but Gale.

"I guess that answers why it sounded like her communication device was under a pile of clothes," Plutarch's voice was full of excitement.

"Well, who could blame her," Cressida said off handily. "They haven't seen each other in how long? Did you think they'd just shake hands and say, let's go meet up with the crew from Thirteen?"

"Plutarch?" Katniss' voice rang clear.

"Katniss! Thank heaven!" Plutarch's voice was suddenly full of concern.

"Sorry about losing communication with you, but... Plutarch, Peeta's here. Effie helped him escape, but he's in need of medical attention."

"Yes, we overheard you greeting him," Plutarch said with a hint of teasing in his voice.

"Katniss how bad is he?" Gale asked before the man started begging Katniss for details of what went on inside of the tunnel.

"Bad. I'm not sure if he's strong enough to make it through the tunnel to the village. We're closer to the woods, can the craft pick us up there?"

"You'll have to make it to that clearing," Gale said to her. "Can you do that?"

"We really have no choice. I'll contact you when we get close."

"See you soon, Catnip," Gale said and hoped Plutarch and Cressida didn't give him any shit for taking over the conversation.

"...D9 On...you copy?"

"Affirma...Dni...One One. Thre...eeps...er Vict...Vi..."

"What the hell was that!?" Gale asked of the sounds that came over the pilot's radio.

"Capitol hoverplanes!" The pilot's head shot around to Plutarch.

"Pull up," Plutarch ordered. "Get us out of here."

"What the hell are you doing!?" Gale yelled, "We can't just abandon them!"

"Pilot, get us to the outskirts of Twelve immediately, and I'll cut our communications with Katniss."

"Yes, sir."

"NO!" Gale jumped out of his seat. "I knew this was a trap! I knew it! Go back for them! We've got to get them out of there!"

"What good will we be doing them if we're dead?" Plutarch's voice grew stern. "None of us can be captured, soldier Hawthorne."

Gale remembered the nightlock pill in the pocket of his uniform. "And if they capture Katniss and Peeta?"

"Peeta was hiding in that tunnel, and we were unable to detect him, so it's reasonable to assume that they're safe." Plutarch pushed a few buttons on his computer. "Now sit down soldier and do as you're ordered."

"Catnip!" Gale called through his communication piece. "CATNIP!"

"She can't hear you. I've killed the feed," Plutarch glared at him. "Pilot once we're..."

"We're not de...crafts in the area...ne Two. It...enter...space." The sound of the Capitol's pilots crackled over the radio.

"Should I kill the radio too, sir?" The pilot asked.

"Only if District Thirteen attempts to contact us." Gale noticed a distinct transformation in Plutarch Heavensbee when he spoke. He was no longer in the presence of a flighty Capitol resident, but a former Head Gamemaker. The Capitol's radio transmissions continued to break through in little bits and pieces as they headed for safety. Plutarch gave further instructions to the pilot, "Once we're out of range, radio Thirteen and inform them of the situation."

Gale sat quietly until he could no longer hold his tongue. "Plutarch, how will we know if Katniss and Peeta are in danger if we don't have communications with them?"

"I'll open up the lines once we can no longer hear the Capitol's army."

"If the hovercraft's radios won't be able to pick them up, how will we?" Gale asked.

"Our communications are linked into my computer, and Peeta obviously has it's partner, which means I should be able to use it to link our systems. Now sit down and take note of what these pilots are saying. I'm sure President Coin will want a briefing once we're back."

'If we get back,' Gale thought to himself as he sat in silence.

The moment they lost the Capitol's transmissions the pilot opened up a line of communication with Thirteen and got orders from President

Coin. A heavily armed craft would be sent in along with a medical team for Peeta and they were to pick the pair up from Twelve. In the meantime, Gale's hovercraft was to head back into radio range and listen in to the Capitol's transmissions. Gale didn't know how long the entire process had taken but it felt like a lifetime.

"When are you going to open up that line of communication with Katniss and Peeta?" Gale asked Plutarch remembering that the man said he'd do it as soon as they were out of radio frequency.

"I think it's wise if we wait until we no longer hear the Capitol's army communicating with one another."

Gale blew out a frustrated breath, and waited for Snow's army to get the hell out of Twelve. "I haven't heard a transmission from them for over five minutes," Gale focused on Plutarch.

"Thirty minutes of silence and I shall open up a line." Plutarch gave Gale a look of warning. "Don't worry soldier," Plutarch sat upright and kept a cool, decisive tone in his voice. "We won't leave them here. When they try to contact us, they'll figure out that something is wrong and stay put."

"How do you know that?" Gale ran a troubled hand through his hair leaving it in a disheveled mess.

"This is Katniss and Peeta Mellark we're talking about. Victors of the Seventy-Forth Hunger Games. Do you honestly believe they would leave their safe haven if we don't respond to them?"

He pierced Plutarch with a damning stare and wondered if this was how Katniss felt about Coin continually putting off Peeta's rescue mission.

The second Plutarch opened the lines he gave Gale a curt nod and pointed a finger at him, "You're a go."

Relief washed through Gale at the sound of Katniss' voice. He would have felt better if he were the one to pick them up from Twelve, but that wasn't the case. The trip back to Thirteen took forever, and once they landed Gale was instructed by Plutarch to brief President Coin in the Command Center. He wanted to wait for Katniss, but Plutarch's order wasn't to be ignored.

"Soldier Hawthorne," President Coin stood with her hands behind her back. "Update."

"Pilots from," he had to think about how they identified themselves, "They used the call signs D9."

"District Nine pilots," Coin stated.

"From what we could decipher, they detected a life sign in Victor's Village," it suddenly dawned on Gale that he may have been the life they detected, "and did a search for Peeta Mellark who escaped with the help of Effie Trinket this morning in District Twelve."

"I was informed that he was discovered." Coin made motion with her hand for Gale to take a seat. "Anything else, soldier?"

"No ma'am."

"Then it's time to discuss your next mission." Coin stood a few feet away from Gale. "Now that we have our Jabberjay I believe that our Mockingjay will be looking to him instead of you. There are problems in District Two, and we're in need of soldiers."

It hadn't dawned on Gale that he would no longer be fighting alongside of Katniss until Coin said that. "You think Katniss will be okay with me not helping her?"

"I was under the impression when she gave us her demands that you would no longer be needed by her once Peeta returned. Do you think she'll feel otherwise?"

It was hard for him to admit, but he knew the answer to that question. "I don't know ma'am. Maybe."

"If you can convince her to go to District Two with you, then I'd be happy to send her."

There was no way on earth Katniss would leave Peeta's side, and it killed Gale that he wanted to convince her to go on his mission with him. 'You'd rather she be in the line of fire than here with Peeta?' He asked himself. "I think she'll want to spend some time with her husband." Coin gave him a curt nod. "When do I leave for Two?"

"In the morning. Dismissed," Coin turned her back to him.

Gale headed for the door and started thinking about Peeta, the things he had said about the torture he endured while at the Capitol. Gale was flooded with guilt for suggesting to Katniss that she say goodbye to him, for going along with Coin when it came to his rescue. Katniss had only been out of reach for a couple of hours at best, and Gale thought he'd lose his mind. He couldn't imagine what these past few weeks had been like for Katniss or Peeta. "President Coin?"

"Is there something else?" She turned to him.

"Yes, ma'am." Gale stood tall. "Peeta Mellark."

"What about him?"

"I overheard some of the things he went through at the hands of Snow and...ma'am, I'm not sure what your plans are for him, but I'm hoping if you do decide to bring charges of treason up on him once the war is over, you'll take into account all he went through."

"Do you make it your business to speak for the Mellarks, soldier Hawthorne?" Coin asked with an edge to her voice.

"No ma'am but, he's my friend and..."

"Personal relationships while in battle can cloud a soldier's judgment. Putting the needs of one person ahead of the masses during this war can be the equivalent of a death sentence for our cause. Remember that, soldier."

"Yes, ma'am." Gale knew he had just been put in his place.

"Dismissed," Coin said harshly.

There were a million things running through his head. Things he had to get done before he left. Gale headed back to the Hangar for Peeta's art supplies to find that they had already been removed. He stopped by his quarters and caught his family right before they left for the medical bay to greet Peeta. "I'm going to be leaving in the morning," he told his mother who held her head up high as his siblings teared up. His family's visit to Peeta's hospital room was now postponed until Gale told Katniss about his mission. He grabbed her clothing out of his closet, then headed down to Special Defense to see Beetee, who had already left to see Peeta. He ran into Delly and Greasy Sae in the elevator who were talking a mile a minute about Peeta's return, and Gale silently scolded himself for already growing sick of hearing about the guy.

"He looked so tired, but so happy, don't you think?" Delly turned to Gale.

"Haven't seen him yet," Gale said to her.

"Oh, you should. I bet he'd be thrilled to see you."

'I bet he wouldn't,' Gale thought to himself remembering what Snow did to him at the Capitol. He searched for Katniss at the hospital only to be told she went to her quarters and finally caught up with her in the halls of the medical bay. "Hey," he called out to her. "I've been looking for you."

"Well you found me," her tone was as carefree as Gale had ever heard it.

"I need to tell you something," he wondered how she'd take his news. "A couple of things, really."

"Would you mind walking and talking? I want to get back to Peeta." Gale watched as her face glowed when she spoke about him. "I can't believe he's here."

"Yeah," Gale couldn't believe it either. "Kind of a shocker, huh?"

"Shocker is right."

"And here I thought you might find a rodent in the tunnel."

"Nope, just a husband," Katniss' smile illuminated the hallway.

"Well, I don't want to keep you, but I thought you should know...I've been asked to go to District Two in the morning and help out with the rebellion."

Katniss slowed down her pace, and gripped the items she held in her arms to her chest. "Asked or ordered?"

"Both, I guess." Gale answered. "Coin thinks you won't need me by your side anymore now that Peeta's back." He waited for her to say something to the contrary, only to have her stare straight ahead with a face made of stone. "Guess, she was right."

"Gale..." Katniss looked up at him. "There are things you need to know...things that Snow tried to convince Peeta of while he was in the Capitol."

"I already know, Catnip. We overheard him telling you about it."

Katniss let her head drop backwards. "Great. So they heard everything between us?"

"Not everything. We cut our feed once we picked up those radio transmissions."

Katniss stopped walking. "When was that?" She had a look of concern on her face.

"Right after I signed off with you the first time. Why?"

Katniss looked down the hall then back up at him. "Nothing."

"There's something else I wanted to tell you too," Gale hoped she wouldn't get angry with him. "I spoke to Coin about Peeta...tried to convince her not to bring him up on charges of treason."

"You did what!?" She snapped at him.

"I wanted to help after I heard about the things he went through."

"Even though I told you not to?" Katniss stormed down the hall and stopped a few feet away from Peeta's hospital room. "I told you not to say a thing, Gale. God, you ha..." Katniss stopped talking when a nurse walked past them and into Peeta's room. "You have no idea what's going on Gale. You only know what she's telling you, not the truth. I really wished you wouldn't have done that."

Gale crossed his arms over his chest and asked, "Why don't we go in and ask Peeta if he minds that I spoke on his behalf?"

"No," Katniss gripped Gale's arm stopping him in his tracks.

"Why not? You think he'll take my side? That he'll realize I was being a good friend?"

"I don't think you and Peeta are friends anymore, Gale, and..." Katniss took a long drawn out pause before she added, "...I don't think I can be your friend right now either."

"Because I talked to Coin?" Gale's brows shot up in panic. "Katniss, don't do this."

"That's not why, Gale. I told you...there are some things you don't know about, and..." She threw a hand up in the air, "Why do you have to leave tomorrow? It would be so much easier if you waited a few days, then I could tell you everything."

"You could come with me you know," Gale gave her a boyish grin. "Think of how good it felt when we were in Eight standing side by side, fighting against the Capitol."

Katniss gave her head a slow shake. "That didn't feel good at all, Gale. It was one of the worst decisions I've ever made."

"Katniss you were brilliant out there," he held onto her arm. "I've never been more proud of you than I was in that moment. Not even when you won the Games."

Katniss' eyes shot up to his. "You should go now Gale. I need to get back to Peeta."

"Can I at least welcome the guy back home?"

"I don't think that would be too wise, Gale. He's pretty upset with you right now."

"I didn't do a damn thing with you, and he needs to hear that from me, Catnip." Gale pointed towards Peeta's room.

"Christ," Katniss blew out a huge breath. Neither one of them noticed the nurse leaving his room or leaving Peeta's door open. "He thinks you were the one that got me pregnant."

"Are you kidding me?" Gale felt like he had been slapped across the face when she said that. "I'm sorry, Catnip," he whispered so quietly he didn't know if she heard him until she gave him a sad smile and nodded at him. "Look, I didn't want to cause any trouble. I just wanted to..." his sentence trailed off. He wanted to help, but it seemed that the more he tried to help her the worse things got. 'Maybe she's right, and I should just mind my own business,' he thought to himself.

"Gale, he's my husband. I told you earlier, he's my responsibility. I'll take care of him."

"I know that," Gale said frustrated with his own actions

"Then act like it," Katniss said back to him in a scolding tone. "Once he's back on his feet...hopefully we'll be able to pick up where we left off," there was a hint of hope in her eyes.

"You really think we'll ever be able to do that, Catnip? Now that he's back...now that he thinks these things about me?"

"I hope so. I don't want to lose you, Gale, but he needs me."

"Yeah, and the rebellion needs both of you." He thought of how excited Plutarch and Cressida were over their reunion in the tunnel. "Now that their Jabberjay is here, they'll need to make sure they get plenty of great footage of the two of you. Just like the Games."

"That's not fair, Gale."

"It was never fair, Catnip. None of this was fair to you." It wasn't fair to any of them. He contemplated insisting on seeing Peeta, then let it go. It was time to let them both go. "You know what...go to him. He needs you." Gale paused. "I don't," his attempt at sounding strong fell flat. "I'm not going to sit around waiting for you, Catnip. I've got to move on." It was time to say goodbye.

"I know," she looked down between her feet. "I'm sorry, Gale."

"Yeah...well..." He stuffed his hand in his pocket and felt the silky material. "I wanted to give this to you before I left," he gave her a timid smile.

He was thrilled he was able to make her laugh one last time before she said, "Thanks."

"I'll miss you, Catnip." Gale reached out and took her hand.

"I'll miss you too," she stood on her tiptoes and hugged him. "Take care of yourself," she kissed his cheek.

The sound of Peeta's voice booming at them turned both their heads. "Is this how it happened in Twelve too!?"

"Peeta..."

"This isn't what you think," Gale defended himself.

"Oh, and what do I think this is, Gale?"

Now what was he supposed to do? The only thing he could think of was to explain things to Peeta. "Katniss told me what Snow did to you Peeta, and I'm here to tell you it was all lies."

"Peeta, please...let's just go back to..." Katniss attempted to usher Peeta back to his room to no avail.

"Don't touch me! You almost had me fooled...two timing bitch." Gale had no clue who this man was standing before him, yelling at Katniss then talking to her like she was trash, but it sure as hell wasn't the guy he knew in Twelve.

"That's enough of that." There was no way he was going to let Peeta talk to her that way regardless of whether or not he was her husband.

"This is none of your business, Hawthorne. This is between me and my...*wife*. For all I know that was a lie too. Why the hell would I marry someone like you?"

"You don't know what you're saying Peeta," Katniss began scanning the hall for what Gale could only assume was a doctor.

"You know what," Gale tripped slightly backwards when Peeta pushed past him, "from what I understand, we didn't even have a ceremony. It was some sort of *private* toasting. Why don't we consider this a *private* divorce."

"You should go back to your room, Peeta," Gale warned, "before you cross any more lines." He was about ten seconds away from punching Peeta in the face.

"And you should go to hell!" Peeta yelled as he beat Gale to the literal punch.

"You son of a bitch!" Gale had been waiting for this day for a long time. When they lived in Twelve he was certain that he and Peeta would come to blows, then they became friends and Gale thought that was all behind them. Now Gale was filled with the anger he had back when he first found out about Peeta and Katniss. Gale fought the guy, but it didn't matter how many punches he threw, Peeta was always one step ahead of him. He took a lot more blows than he landed against Peeta, and tasted blood when a fist smashed into his mouth.

"You were supposed to be my friend!"

"Back off dough boy!" Gale grunted as he tried to push Peeta off of him, but the guy was relentless.

"PEETA!" Katniss tried to jump between them and Gale saw her flying into a wall as a result of a punch Peeta threw.

That was it, now he was going to kick the shit out of the guy. Gale was determined to teach Peeta a lesson, but he had forgotten that the guy he was fighting, though shorter than him, thinner than him, appearing weak, was a wrestler. Most of all he was a victor. One of Thirteen's soldiers appeared out of nowhere and took Peeta's foot in the

stomach just as he twisted himself around to take Gale in a choke hold. Gale's throat began to burn within seconds of Peeta putting him in a headlock. For a brief second he was sure Peeta was going to snap his neck. He tried to claw at Peeta's arm, tried to take a step back, and break free, but his body went into panic mode without oxygen flowing to his brain. He thought Peeta had finally released him until he saw the guy lying on the ground, and Boggs standing over him with something black in his hand. "Yo..." he tried to speak, but his throat was burning. He reached out to Katniss who shot him a glare, and thought, 'What the hell did I do?'

"Are you okay?" Katniss asked him, the glare gone.

"Th..." he swallowed a few times, then tried again, "think so."

"Did he hurt you?"

"He almost killed me," Gale attempted to holler, but his voice cracked mid sentence.

"You should have stayed away, Gale." Katniss shook her head from side to side, and pushed a doctor's hand away. "Leave me alone. I'm fine."

"Katniss," Evelyn and Dr. Valero rushed down the hall and led her behind Peeta's unconscious body into his room.

"Is he okay?" Katniss reached for Peeta as they walked. "Did Gale hurt him?"

"Did *Gale* hurt *him*?" He repeated out loud. "Are you shitting me?" Gale turned to Beetee who was standing behind him. "She's kidding, right? I was the one in the headlock."

"He was the one that's been tortured for weeks," Beetee said as he pushed his glasses onto his nose. "The one that's been drugged with a deadly venom that's compromised his mental well-being."

"I know he's been drugged, but that was when he was in the Capitol."

"No," Beetee corrected Gale, "Katniss had to give him the drugs in the tunnel. Peeta almost died out there today."

Gale squeezed his eyes shut. "Holy shit," he said as he hung his head down. "What the hell happened to that guy?"

"More than we will ever know," Beetee walked towards Peeta's room then stopped and added, "You're lucky he was in such a weakened state, or you'd have been dead within seconds."

Gale followed a doctor down the hall towards another exam room and thought, 'If that's Peeta's weakened state, I don't want to find out what it's like to be on his bad side when he's fully recovered.'

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It had been only hours, less than a day, since Peeta had been in Effie's presence, yet the signs of torture were written all over her face. The makeup, which had been artistically applied, no doubt by Portia, failed to hide the bruise just underneath Effie's cheekbone, and he wondered if his stylist allowed Effie's injury to show purposefully. Though she sat with pride, her chin held high, Peeta still noticed the slight slump in her shoulders, the nervous twitching of her high heeled

shoe tapping away at the chair they had her bound to. "She's being tortured," his voice was deeper than normal, quiet, yet it silenced the room of rebels who had begun to argue about the warning Effie had given them.

"Peeta," Katniss wrapped her hand around the one he was clutching the arm of his wheelchair with.

"Don't touch me," he said in warning. A new found rage coursed through him. The desire to retaliate, to head back to the Capitol and follow through on his promise of killing Snow was overwhelming. "Cuff me," he said to no one in particular. "NOW!" A metal shackle was snapped onto his free hand, linking him to the chair, but it wasn't enough. His hands began to shake, tremor with a burning fury. "LEGS!" He yelled out, "DO IT!" His focus was straight ahead, staring at the now black television screen that had held Effie's image only a few seconds before. It didn't matter who put the chains on him, all that mattered was that he was now bound, unable to break free from the chair.

"Take him back to the hospital," a strong female voice ordered.

Peeta's eyes slowly followed the sound of President Coin's command holding her still with a deadly glare.

"I wouldn't recommend that," Katniss' words came out sounding much like a threat. "Peeta knows what they're going through out there. He's lived through it. He's the only one of us that can give us an accurate assessment of this situation."

"Effie's warning us," he spoke with an unmistakable quake in his voice. "Snow's going to do something to Thirteen."

"What'd I tell ya?" Haymitch's hand flew up in the air. "She's telling us they're coming!"

"There's no proof of that, Haymitch," Coin shot a glance in his direction. "For all we know she could be the traitor and lied during that recording."

"Effie killed the traitor!" Peeta yelled out. "You people have no clue," the muscles in his jaw clenched, "no clue what that woman has done for me...for this rebellion. She purposely let herself get captured so Snow would take his anger out on her, so I could be free and you people could have your damn Jabberjay." It took every ounce of self discipline to keep himself from shaking the chair in a violent outburst of anger. "You honestly think she'd risk everything...get me out of the Capitol, just to turn her allegiance around? If you do, then you people are idiots, and deserve to fall victim to Snow's attack."

"Peeta has an excellent point madam president," Plutarch spoke in an even tone. "He's confirmed what Miss. Trinket said in the recording she sent to us. What would be the harm in preparing for the worst? If we are attacked, then we'll be prepared. If not, then we can consider it a drill."

There was silence in the room until Coin said, "We have been overdue for a level five drill. Sound the alarms. Evacuate to the lower levels."

The room full of people scattered about, each one on their own mission. Each person had a job to do, and very little time to do it in. Everyone seemed to have a purpose, but Peeta. Minutes? Hours? He had no clue how much time had passed since he was wheeled into a bunker in the depths of Thirteen. Katniss' offer to stay with him was brushed aside. Peeta could no longer see her in the way he had earlier no matter how hard he tried. She was now the enemy.

"I'm not leaving you," Katniss crouched down next to Peeta's wheelchair and spoke to him. "I told you already, you don't scare me."

A flicker of ice...hate, glimmered in Peeta's eyes. "This is your fault. If she hadn't gotten me out of there to be with you, I'd be the one on the end of Snow's threats, not all of these people. Not my mother." The look of horror splayed on Katniss' face told Peeta he had accomplished his goal and caused her as much pain as he felt. "Now get out. I don't want you anywhere near me." She stood, her feet plastered to the concrete floor. "I SAID GET OUT!" With a hand clamped over her mouth, and one clutching at her stomach, Katniss turned on her heels and ran from the tiny room Peeta now thought of as his jail cell.

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"You look divine Miss. Trinket. Like a proud Capitol resident," Snow stood to the back of the stage, hidden in darkness behind the chairs that had been set out for Caesar's guests. "Where's that stylist?"

"There sir," someone pointed to the side of the stage at Portia.

"She's looking a bit...peaked, don't you think?" Snow stepped up to Effie whose legs were being fastened to her seat. "Much like a starving puppy unable to find shelter in the rain," he tilted his head to the side giving Portia the once over. "It's a good thing my officials

aren't picky." He gave a nod to the Peacekeeper that held Portia by the arm, an unspoken signal to hand her off to the burly official licking at his lips with anticipation. "I do believe he outweighs her by about a hundred pounds or so, don't you?" Snow let out a low chuckle that left Effie's skin crawling.

"What's wrong Snow, can't get it up yourself so you have to have your cronies rape innocent women?" Johanna, who had been standing behind them the entire time spat out.

"Miss. Mason," Snow turned to her. "I understand you're not willing to speak on camera."

"No, I'll speak," Johanna struggled to loosen her guards' grip on her limbs. "I'd be happy to tell the world exactly what type of despicable pig you are."

"Yes, you do have a terrible habit of letting your tongue run rampant, but I have a little incentive for you," Snow snapped his fingers in the air, and Annie Cresta was brought out by four Peacekeepers the size of brick houses. "If you don't do what I ask, Miss. Cresta here will suffer the same consequences as that stylist, with the exception of a few things." Snow paced around Johanna in a circle. "I'm growing tired of her whining, so she'll be turned into an Avox first."

"You're killing an entire country full of kids. You think your threat is going to change my mind?" Johanna was cuffed to her chair. "Her crying has been getting on my nerves for weeks. Let your officials have her!"

"Did I say she'd be going to an official?" Snow leered. "No my dear, Miss. Cresta will be used as a plaything for my elite guards as a way of..." he faced Effie, "...expressing my gratitude. Those men that

brought her in are just an example of who will be using her as their toy."

"Johanna, please," Effie pleaded. "Please do what he says."

Her hands began to shake, her nostrils flared. Johanna Mason couldn't care less about Annie Cresta, but she did care about Finnick. 'Guess you were wrong,' she thought to herself. 'They can still hurt you. There is still someone you love in this world.' "What do you want me to say?"

"Excellent," Snow's puffy lips formed a lecherous grin as he gave each person their instructions. "Now, Miss. Cresta," he spoke to her like a child. "All you have to do is read, and if you don't cry while doing so, when I capture Finnick Odair, I shall make his death a swift one." Annie sucked up her tears. "Good girl."

"Why's Trinket here?" Johanna glared at Snow. "The people in this country are only going to see her as one of you."

"Not all of them." Snow turned to Effie. "She will be sending a message not only to that scourge, Katniss and Peeta, but also to the residents of the Capitol. Miss. Trinket will be a shining example of what happens to the people that choose to turn their back on their government and take sides with the rebels." Snow took his place in the darkness. "What is that saying you have before going on air, Caesar?"

"Break a leg," the host took his designated spot in the spotlight.

"My how appropriate," Snow let out a laugh. "Break a leg," he said to the three women sitting on stage, the humor gone from his voice, and a demented gleam in his eyes.

Caesar began the interviews with introductions, "Annie Cresta, victor from District Four. Johanna Mason, victor from District Seven. Any comments before we begin Annie?" She shook her head no. "Johanna?"

She peered dangerously through squinted eyes. "No."

"Then let's move onto the disastrous happenings in our nation."

Johanna saw her name on a prompt, and her scripted dialogue slowly scrawling its way upwards. Did she follow Snow's orders or take matters into her own hands? The temptation to speak her mind was so great, but the sound of Finnick's cries when they were stuck in the jabberjay wedge of the arena, seeing him curled into a fetal position with his hands cupped over his ears when he thought Annie was being tortured, churned up emotions she hadn't had since her family was murdered. She had no clue if Snow would keep his word or not, but Johanna could not hold herself responsible for Annie being turned into an Avox and raped by a swarm of Peacekeepers with a blood lust that could never be quenched. "What you're seeing here are the remains of District..." She narrated the damage done in each district with a monotone voice except for District Four, which Annie did through continual hitches in her throat, and a surprisingly dry face.

"Thank you, Annie...Johanna," Caesar faced the camera. "Finally, I would like to introduce Effie Trinket, former escort for District Twelve, and prominent Capitol resident." Caesar turned to her and said, "But that's not so accurate a description for you now is it, Effie? In the past day it has come to light that you have been a member of the rebellion for quite some time now. Aiding in the escape of Peeta Mellark, notorious rebel leader. Do you have anything to say about that?"

There was plenty to say, but Effie was unable to voice her opinions if she was to go through with her plan. "I am an example of what

happens when you fall victim to the rebellion. I was once a popular public figure, and am now no better than those that are causing the people of this nation to suffer."

"Is that all?" Caesar asked her.

"No," she turned to face the prompter and read out loud. "What you have seen are the remains of a once great nation," Effie held her chin up and worked up as much courage as she could. What she was about to do would most likely cause Snow to act upon his earlier threats. She continued to read the script provided for her then took a deep breath, and placed the thousands of lives living in District Thirteen before the four that were currently being threatened in the Capitol. "Please my darlings," Effie could only hope Haymitch knew she was including him in her sentiment, "My sweet boy, Peeta...my fiery girl, Katniss... there in Thirteen...dead by morni..." The butt of a rifle struck her in the middle of her back, knocking her, and the chair her feet were cuffed to, to the floor. 'No, please, no!' Effie cried out in her mind when she saw Annie and Johanna being ripped from their spots, and Portia being dragged away by Peacekeepers instead of the Capitol official.

Johanna had to give credit to Effie Trinket. It took balls to do something like she had done. With each kick Effie took by a Peacekeeper, Johanna fought harder and harder to break free. Annie was screaming out in terror as a Peacekeeper forcibly dragged her off stage. Johanna could no longer yell due to a hand gripping her around her throat. Snow's voice boomed, "Cut the feed!" A large fist caught Effie across the face, her shriek of horror pierced Johanna's ears, and her blood sprayed everywhere. "Take them away!" Snow screamed out.

Effie's limp body was being dragged by uniformed guards. One shoe was dangling off of her foot until it finally fell off at the edge of a stage. Her golden wig was now stained red with her blood. Her clothing torn. Her body bruised...beaten. Stabbing pains, throbbing aches attacked her muscles...her bones, and her heart. She had no idea where Annie had been taken, or Portia for that matter, but Johanna was still by her side, and giving her a look of approval. That was all Effie needed to know she had done the right thing before she allowed the darkness to consume her and drifted into a world of unconsciousness.

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The first bomb hit District Thirteen, shaking the underground city, causing children to cry, and race into their parent's arms. Causing parents to find a hidden strength for the sake of their family. For Katniss, the rumbling of the building reminded her of Peeta's episodes that exploded out of nowhere. Her eyes continuously darted toward the tiny room he had been locked in with only a doctor and armed soldiers as guards. When her mother had been called to help in medical, only thirty or so yards away from where Katniss and Prim took shelter, Katniss had hoped her mother would be caring for Peeta. A loving hand to help guide him through this time of uncertainty, but there was no such luck. She stared at the box Gale had brought her when he went to her mother's quarters, Peeta's art supplies sticking out, her parent's wedding photo, and various other items that meant the world to her, and let her eyes drift to her sister and Buttercup. 'Oh,

Prim, what were you thinking?' Katniss let her head fall into her hand and tried to put the memory out of her mind.

"Prim? Have you seen her?" Katniss' mother was visibly searching the bunker for her youngest child.

"Isn't she with you?" Bing asked.

"No. She left the hospital ward ten minutes before I did."

"Dear God," Katniss knew exactly where her sister had gone.

"Buttercup! She went back for that damn cat!" The argument that broke out between Bing, Katniss and the security officers prohibiting people from leaving the shelter grew out of hand. Katniss flung herself, fists pummeling into a chest of one of the soldiers as Bing pulled her off and dragged her back to their designated area.

Within minutes Gale entered with Prim in tow. "Hey," he set the large container down at Katniss' feet. "Was just checking to make sure everything was secure up there and thought you might want these things. They wouldn't survive if bombs went off up there."

Katniss spied the parachute she kept the spile and pearl in and held it against her chest, the book Regina had given to her stared back at her, almost taunting her to use it to talk to Peeta the way she had prior to his return. "Thank..." Prim was being hugged by her mother and Peeta's father, kissed and scolded at the same time. "Thank you...for everything," it took a lot for her to keep her emotions in check.

"I wasn't able to bring all of Peeta's canvases, but I got a few of them. I know how much that stuff means to him, and your dad's jacket is in there too. Hope you don't mind that Prim unlocked your room for me so I could get that stuff."

Katniss nodded silently then gave into her emotions and gave Gale a quick hug. "This means the world to me...to Peeta."

"How's he doing?"

"I don't know. He doesn't want to see me," Katniss' head hung down. "He blames me for this."

"He doesn't know what he's saying, Catnip. Beetee told me about that crap they gave him at the Capitol." Gale pointed towards Peeta's door, "That's not Peeta. That's the effects of Snow's drugs."

"I know, but it still hurts that he won't let me be in there with him."

"Give him time, Catnip. No one loves you the way Peeta does." Gale stroked her upper arm. "If he doesn't remember how much he loved you, there's no doubt in my mind that he'll fall in love with you all over again."

Time was a double edge sword. Katniss either had too much of it or not enough. During the Games there were times when hours seemed like minutes, and seconds seemed like days. Since being in Thirteen the only time that sped by was when she left and went to Eight. Shooting at Capitol hoverplanes with her bow and arrows, causing them to explode midair, gave her a sense of power. Of course that came to a screeching halt the moment it was over and she remembered why she never should have gone there in the first place. She had craved Peeta's strength then, like she did now, but he had been gone, over a thousand miles away, and now when he was within walking distance of her, he felt even further.

"How are you doing?" A deeper version of Peeta's voice asked Katniss. She needed to answer her father in law, but she couldn't find it in herself to look at him for when she did she saw Peeta. A version

of her husband Thirty years in the future...a future she now thought was unattainable. Katniss merely nodded her head in answer to Bing's question and pushed her sorrow deep within.

A mattress from their bunk was pulled onto the floor, an unused bed was made for buttercup out of a small drawer built into the rock wall, and Prim curled up with the cat in a ball, fast asleep, was what Katniss focused on. She was desperate to lift her eyes to the room where Peeta stayed. Temptation to go to him was so great, but being turned away again by the hospital staff who continually checked in with him was more than her shattered heart could take. She thought of the times she felt this way in the past, heartbroken, and lost. Wondered what helped her out of those situations. *"What makes you happy, Katniss?"* Peeta's voice spoke to her in the back of her mind.

"You do," her lips moved in the darkness. "I need to talk to you, Peeta. Please forgive me for causing this." He was right when he told her she was the reason for putting all of these lives in danger. She was the reason Twelve was destroyed. The reason former victors were called back into the arena.

"Bing," Katniss' mother had sneaked up on Katniss and interrupted the blame game she was currently starring in. "Peeta has calmed down some if you want to try again." Katniss' hand shot out, gripping her mother's arm, but her mother didn't need to speak. The expression she wore did all the talking Katniss needed to hear. Peeta didn't want anything to do with her anymore.

Bing took out the items from the box, her mother's houseplant, the picture of her parents, the book that continued to haunt her, the parachute was tied to a belt loop on Katniss' pants, and carried the paint supplies into his son. Katniss' eyes were glued on her father in law's back as he stood at the doorway leading into Peeta's room,

watched, and waited. A mixture of relief and jealousy flooded through her when he stepped into the room and the door closed behind him. She snatched the book up, held the tiny flashlight that had been provided for her in her sack, one for each member of her family, and stuck it between her teeth. The blank white page stared up at her, the pen she kept tucked between the pages was in her fingers, and she did what she needed to do. She stopped listening to her head, and started listening to her heart. Her words to Peeta...to herself were written down as her lips silently moved as though she were having a conversation with the one person in the world she didn't have a problem talking to.

"Dear Peeta,

Though you're only a few feet away from me, I now know that we are a world apart, and we'll probably never breach that gap again. I'm sitting here listening to the sounds of bombs drop, your pearl in my pocket, your locket around my neck, and a feeling of sorrow that runs so deep for what we've lost. We were so in love, weren't we? I often wondered growing up why I was so dead set on never having a relationship, never falling in love, but those questions were answered the day we got married...the night we had our toasting. It was in that moment that I realized what it was that had been keeping me from love, and as I sit here now I want to tell you that I don't regret letting you in. I'll never regret loving you...letting you love me. How could I? You gave me more than anyone could have asked, and I'll always be thankful for the life we created together. No matter what happens between us, our little banana nut will grow up knowing it was conceived in one of the greatest love stories ever told. You were right when you said our love was planned out before we were even born. I wonder sometimes if our child will be blessed that way. I hope it is. My hope is for this baby to grow up appreciating the type of love you allowed me to experience. Though we weren't able to spend decades

together like we had planned, I want you to know...the time we did have together...our love...it was a lifetime's worth. If only..."

The flashlight she held between her teeth fell, causing its light to shine upwards highlighting her face. As her body quaked with grief, she picked up the pen again, held the light in her free hand and let the misery that flowed through her out onto the page.

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"Leave the paints and go," Peeta spoke harshly from a hospital bed, laying on the flat of his back, to his father.

"I'll put them down, but I'm not leaving." Bing placed the box on the floor in the corner of the small room. "I'll be staying here with you till this is over."

Peeta sat upright, "No! Get out!"

"That's not going to happen son." Bing sat in the only thing available, the wheelchair they had rolled Peeta in on. "Whether you like it or not, I'm your father, and you're still considered too young to make these choices on your own, so..." he pressed his elbows to his knees, "...you're stuck with me."

Peeta flopped back down on the bed, threw his arm over his eyes and said, "I'm married. I don't need parental consent for anything anymore. You lost that right when you signed me over to...*her*."

"You go ahead and be angry. I'm just gonna get some rest." Bing sat back in the chair and closed his eyes. "Goodnight, Peeta. See you in the morning."

Sleep was nowhere to be found in the tiny bunker Peeta Mellark felt he was trapped inside of. Blasts went off, not bothering him at all, it was the images that came when he closed his eyes that intruded on his slumber. Effie being beaten. Johanna when she returned to the cell after her water torture, and Annie...innocent Annie that knew nothing of the rebellion and was being held just to torture Finnick. With each nightmare his arms and legs shot straight out, paralyzing him with fear, unable to move anything but the blue eyes that glowed in the dark zipping from side to side, searching his surroundings for an unattainable sense of security. Confirming he was no longer at the Capitol. A doctor came in and gave him a shot in the base of his neck just as the tremors started, but the anger never subsided, instead it slowly burned a hole in the pit of his stomach. He waited for the familiar feeling of lightness in his extremities from the shot, but it never came. The shakes never fully came either, but neither did the pleasurable sensation the drug normally brought, which frustrated the hell out of Peeta. The metal bars preventing him from rolling out of his bed felt like ice as did the blood that flowed through him. A chill shot through him, a blast of cold from whatever it was they shot into his system. 'I can't be here,' he thought to himself as he sat up, intent on leaving his room, only to be stopped by a guard's watchful stare, and his gun. Peeta's eyes darted towards the box of art supplies. It had been so long since he had painted he wasn't sure if he knew how anymore. He paced quietly around his room, not wanting to disturb his father who had instantly fallen asleep, walked to a window that was no

more than twelve inches big, and peered through the plastic curtain. It was like looking into the coalmines of District Twelve. Darkness. Rock. Metal beams, and a light coming from a miner's helmet. Peeta squinted into the blackness trying to make out the sole miner. The light on his helmet fell a short distance highlighting its owner. "Katniss," he briefly wondered if this was a dream. Temptation to run to her and play their game, ask her if this was real or not, flashed through him. Her face was illuminated by the edges of light that came from what Peeta could only assume was a flashlight. Her shoulders were quaking. Her face buried in her hands. He may not have been able to make out the tears that were streaming down her face, but Peeta didn't need to know she was sobbing. He let the curtain fall back in place before he let himself fall victim to her again. A knot formed in his gut as his fingers spread the curtain open an inch...two. He sucked in a deep breath between his clenched teeth, "Don't cry," he mouthed to her. He backed slowly away from the window, turned and headed for the box of paints.

Shame had quickly become a driving force in Peeta's life. Disgrace for things he had said...done. He had continually allowed animosity into his life, welcomed it in some instances, and in doing so caused those around him, those that loved him, to go through emotional turmoil. 'No more,' he thought to himself. After seeing Katniss crying in the darkness of Thirteen's depths, Peeta could no longer put her through a living hell. He would do what he had promised. He would be the Jabberjay like he and Katniss talked about, he would demand that she was allowed to stay in Thirteen...take care of his responsibilities as a provider for their child, but he would not allow weakness, for that's what she was to him, back in. 'They're better off without you,' he thought to himself as he lifted a canvas and placed it on his easel. 'Once you're out of here, tell her it's over, and mean it this time.' A cardboard flap was ripped off of the box to be used as a palette, the world shut out, Peeta dipped a brush into various colors until he

created a black that looked blue. His intention had been to paint his nightmare. The dank cells of the Capitol, but his fingers seemed to have a mind of their own. A dark sky was painted joined by shimmering stars, a silvery moon that radiated into a bedroom. Curtains fluttered as they hung over an open window, billowing in the late spring breeze. A full length mirror at an odd angle at the end of a bed, joined the picture, slowly completing the supporting cast of his portrait. The stars of the show had yet to be introduced.

"Peeta, you need to eat," the sound of his father's voice was ignored.

When his eyes grew heavy with sleep, Peeta grabbed a blanket from his bed and curled onto the floor in front of the picture, finding the cold, hard surface a form of penance. His body trembled, and a shot was given. The fits of outrage were temporarily quelled for reasons unknown to Peeta. The only time he spoke was to say, "No," when he was asked if Katniss could see him. Others came, but they were ignored until finally no one came at all, and only he and his father remained in the tiny room. The guard now stood outside as Peeta captured a split second of his life on canvas.

Sheets with a satiny finish were added in the center of the portrait, tangled between a pair of feminine legs, the flesh tone of a prosthetic, and a masculine calf covered in dark blond hair. With each stroke of his paintbrush, Peeta felt himself falling in love with her. With Katniss. He no longer questioned the emotions that consumed him while in the tunnel, he knew them to be true, and it was because of the deep seeded affection that now powered his moving hands, he let Katniss and his unborn child go. There were no tears when he added the finishing touches to the scene painted out before him, but adoration. Fingers peaked out from between flowing chestnut locks. A bent elbow hid the soft white flesh of her bosom. An expression of complete and utter devotion radiated between them, an unmistakable

flow of love shared between two people. 'Rapture,' Peeta thought to himself as he set the paintbrush down on the cardboard palette. He trailed a finger along the outer edge of the canvas and mouthed, "I'm sorry." Peeta stood staring at the portrait until he felt his father's arms pull him in.

"That's remarkable," Peeta could hear the slight hitch in his dad's voice as he spoke.

"Don't show it to her, dad. She can never see this."

"Why no..."

"Please," Peeta interrupted him. "I have to end it dad. I could kill her."

"Peeta, you wouldn't do that," His father stroked the back of his head.

"Dad, what if it had been Katniss I attacked instead of Gale?" His father was silent. "All it takes is one time...one explosion and I kill not only her but our baby." His father's arms gripped him tightly as President Coin's voice spoke over a loudspeaker informing the population that they could now head to their new quarters if their old ones had been damaged during the bombing. Peeta released his father, looked around the room and asked, "Dad, how long have we been down here?"

"For over three days now, Peeta."

"Three days?" He ran a paint covered hand through his hair. "Guess I should eat something, huh?"

"You ate a couple of hours ago, but if you're hungry..."

"I did?" Peeta interrupted his dad, not remembering a thing from the past few days. "So, it's over...the bombing?" His father nodded.

"Did...did anyone get hurt?" He fought not to ask how Katniss was doing.

"She's fine, Peeta. Pretty shaken up after the things you said to her, but she's fine."

"Good. I'm glad she's okay," he turned to his dad. "What do I do now?"

"I'm not sure what we do. I know I'll probably need new quarters since mine were on the top floor next to Evelyn's." Bing rested a hand on Peeta's shoulder. "I should probably find out about that."

The tears Peeta didn't know he had shed, dripped down his cheeks. "That's not what I mean." Thoughts of a life without Katniss...without his child cut through him. He lifted his gaze to his father. "What do I do now, dad? What do I do now?" Peeta felt like he was a child again, only this time the physical pain was brought on by his own actions. He had to cut Katniss out of his life for good.

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'Are you alright? Are you dead? Of course you're not dead. There's really no purpose in killing you. It's not like you're a wealth of information for Snow,' Finnick's head was reeling as he made knot after knot in the worn rope. His eyes briefly lifted to scan his surroundings. It was like being on the bottom of the ocean's floor, minus the water. Darkness swelling in, unable to see a few feet in front

of your face, the rocks each bunker was carved into were like underwater caverns, the occasional group of soldiers pacing through the area like a school of fish you caught glimpses of on a deep sea dive. It was the closest he felt to home since he left the arena's ocean. A tiny burst of frustration escaped from his lips. He was not home. No place felt like home while Annie was at the mercy of the Capitol. He yanked firmly on the rope untangling the perfectly formed knots into a straight line again, then started over.

"Hey."

Finnick's head popped up at the sound of Katniss' voice, then went back to his knot tying. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No." Katniss paused. "You?"

"Don't want to. Too many nightmares," Finnick answered.

"Are you holding up alright?"

There was no easy answer to such an uncomplicated question. Was he alright? Since becoming a victor it had been one of the most terrifying questions to answer. Each interview he sat down for with Caesar Flickerman had started off with, "How are you doing, Finnick?" Even now, every time he was put in front of a camera to film a propos, the question was asked.

"Don't answer that," Katniss quickly stated. "It's a God awful question even on a good day."

Though he wanted to know how Katniss was doing, what Peeta's medical status was, Finnick couldn't muster up the courage to ask her the same thing she asked him. "Sit down," he nodded towards the end of his bunk. "What brings you here, Katniss?"

"I...I don't know." She gripped her arms as though she were chilled. "No, I do know, but I can't bring myself to talk about it...unless *you* wanted to talk about it."

"Annie," he whispered as a tear dropped onto his now still hands.

"Peeta..." Katniss whispered back as her hand automatically went for the spot most pregnant women cradled.

'How many times has she done that since being released from the hospital?' Finnick wondered. 'How many signs were there that everyone ignored including myself?' "He still won't see you?" Finnick couldn't imagine what his life would be like if Annie was so close yet refused to be in the same room with him.

Katniss shook her head, "Tomorrow will be three days. His dad says he's painting so..." she gave her shoulder a little shirk, "...he always gets lost when he paints."

Finnick reached out a hand to her and gave hers a little squeeze quickly releasing it. "I'm sure that's all it is. Once this is over he'll want to see you, Katniss."

"How can you be so sure?" Her eyes almost glowed behind the alligator tears that threatened to fall.

"Because I know he loves you...we all do."

"Not anymore Finnick. Snow's taken that from him," Katniss looked over her shoulder towards the area Peeta was in.

"You're wrong, Katniss." He wasn't sure if he should tell her. Not because they were ordered not to, but because Finnick didn't know if she could handle one more burden. If he were in the situation would

he want to know? Yes, he would. "Katniss, there's something you should know."

Finnick raced behind Beetee as they headed for the medical bay. "Is it just him or...or did others get out too?" He asked of Peeta's return.

"I believe it was only him," Beetee spoke, "but there is a bright side to this scenario. Not only will we be able to get valuable information from Peeta regarding the goings on in the Capitol, he'll be able to give us an update on the rest of the prisoners Snow has taken into custody."

The dejected feeling that had shot through Finnick suddenly perked up. He'd be able to find out about Annie. "Yeah," Finnick's long legs raced past Beetee's in lengthy strides. "I knew I should have shoved you in that wheelchair of yours. You're too damn slow."

Finnick stood back until Beetee had greeted Peeta then stepped forward. "Finnick," Peeta reached a hand out to his shoulder and the men embraced. "She's okay. They don't hurt her...just questions," Peeta filled him in on Annie's status without Finnick having to ask.

Being dismissed by President Coin wasn't something Finnick particularly cared for, he wanted more information regarding Annie, but then he saw Katniss waiting patiently, a difficult feat for her, against a steel counter. When Haymitch and Plutarch suggested that they leave and listen to Effie's recording, he didn't argue in the hopes that Effie's message would provide more updates on Annie.

"May I suggest we listen to this privately prior to playing it for President Coin?" Plutarch suggested.

"Why?" Finnick asked. "Think there's something on there we shouldn't let Coin hear?"

"I do," Haymitch's grip on the computer Effie sent was deadly. He took a quick peek over his shoulders making sure no one was around, speaking quietly, "Effie isn't the biggest Coin supporter. She's afraid our new leader is going to take advantage of Katniss and Peeta...endanger their lives, so to speak."

"All of our lives are in danger, Haymitch," Plutarch commented offhandedly.

*"I'll rephrase...**unnecessarily** endanger their lives." Haymitch led them to one of Katniss' hiding places. "There's room in here, but it'll be a tight squeeze," he spoke of the tiny closet that held medical supplies.*

"Here, I'll..." Haymitch pushed Plutarch's reaching hands away from the computer.

"I know how to pull up sponsors and lamb stew," Haymitch snapped.

"Yes," Plutarch resigned, "I'm certain you do."

Finnick stood, eagerly awaiting the sound of Effie Trinket's voice.

"Hello friends," the recognizable Capitol accent filtered quietly through the closet. "If you are listening to this, than Peeta has successfully reached you, and is now in the hands of Katniss, and I'm hoping Dr. Valero." There was a tiny pause. "I shall start with Peeta as I feel he is the most pressing issue." Effie spoke of the drugs he had been given, the recordings he was subjected to, the beatings, Snow's objective, then finally addressed the boxes she had sent. "Inside you will find tracker jacker venom, a failed attempt at its antidote, jacker juice, and the injections I gave to Peeta to help counteract the jacker juice poison. There is a limited supply so I would recommend attempting to replicate it as Peeta will be in desperate need of it. There is no known cure for the damage that has already been done to him, but I have no

doubts that Katniss will once again find a way to bring Peeta back to life." She then went on to talk about Portia...Johanna... "I worry so about her as she has been subjected to terrible acts of water torture. She calls herself a human tea bag, unfortunately her assessment is spot on. They have dunked her continually in a small pool of water, and her heart has stopped twice already only to be brought back to life so they could continue their brutal tactics. As far as Annie goes...dear me, that poor child. Though they do not treat her as poorly as the other prisoners, she has been going through her own personal hell. I was able to protect her in the beginning, but once the rebels had control over District Four Annie's safety was out of my hands. Please tell Finnick that she thinks of him constantly, and I believe, that is the reason she has been so brave...so strong. A true victor." Finnick wiped his hand across the back of his eyes as Effie continued. "Now, it is time to discuss my knowledge of Snow's plans. I shall start with the traitor who is now dead. Carter Darlington and his love interest have been murdered. I am unsure of Carter's murderer, but I was the one that put an end to lanthe, the orange skinned girl from his watering holes. Fortunately Snow does not know that I took her life, and assumes that she and Carter had a disagreement...that he found out about her traitorous ways, and they took each other's lives. There are many things that I am aware of, being Snow's personal assistant has given me the opportunity to search various files, overhear many of his secrets, and all of these things will be of use to the rebellion's efforts, however, and please forgive me for doing such a thing, but I must. I will not release any of this information until we have been pulled from the Capitol. Johanna, Portia, Annie and myself must be rescued." Effie's tone was much stronger and demanding. "I fear now that I have helped Peeta to escape there will be no reason for the rebels to free us from here, however these women that Snow has been putting through hell, have gone through far more than their fair share of punishment. It's time to show your appreciation for those that have

risked it all for the rebellion, and pull them out of this nightmare."
Effie's voice quickly changed to one of compassion and desperation.
"Haymitch, I've held up my end of the bargain," her voice cracked and the unmistakable sound of crying could be heard, "it's time for you to hold up your end. I am waiting for you darling, and I promise...I will not stay back this time. I will follow you...I will follow you anywhere."
Finnick could see the grief spreading across Haymitch's face, the red nose...crinkled brow. "And if by chance I do not make it out alive, I want you to tell my darling children how much I love them, and how very proud I am of all that they have done...all that they are. They have made me a better person, and I can never thank them enough for that." There was silence, a sniffing, then the sound of Effie clearing her voice. "I promised myself I would wait until I saw you to say this Haymitch, but circumstances being what they are... I do not want you to live the rest of your lifewondering. I want you to know that I...I..." a breath was released then Effie spoke as clear as day, "You are loved my vile little man. Truly loved."

"Effie?" Peeta's voice spoke in the background. "Do you know anything about makeup? I'm af..." The recording went dead.

Three men, two victors, one Head Gamemaker sat in silence. Finnick feeling almost relieved knowing Annie had yet to go through what Johanna and Peeta had. Plutarch with his brain in autopilot figuring out a way to keep Effie's ultimatum from Coin's ears, and Haymitch, brought to his knees by an outpouring of emotion from the most unlikely of sources.

"Hand me that computer," Plutarch took it from Haymitch's grasp.

"What are you doing?" Finnick noticed the way the man's fingers were flying across the screen.

"Making a few...adjustments." Plutarch answered without lifting his eyes from the task at hand. "I do not believe our president will take too kindly to Effie's threats, so I shall do what I am good at...work things to the Gamemakers' advantage."

"How ya gonna do that?" Haymitch finally came back to life.

"Just wait and listen." Plutarch took about five minutes, rewound, fast forwarded, clipped sound bites, then said, "Voila!" and played the edited version of Effie's message.

"There are many things that I am aware of, being Snow's personal assistant has given me the opportunity to search various files, overhear many of his secrets, and all of these things will be of use to the rebellion's effort..."

"Effie? Do you know anything about makeup? I'm af..." Peeta's voice was cut off.

"How the hell'd ya do that?" Haymitch reached for the computer.

"It's all in the fingers," Plutarch smiled, his jovial mood restored. "I thought it best to destroy the remainder of the message, I do hope you don't mind, Haymitch."

"Nah, that's...okay...fine."

"So now what?" Finnick could sense from the expression on Haymitch's face that erasing Effie's words hurt a hell of a lot more than what he was letting on. "Do we play this for Coin?"

"Absolutely," Plutarch's face was bright and cheery. "Imagine how badly our president will want to rescue the prisoners now that Effie has promised valuable secrets, but was cut off by an unfortunately

timed interruption?" He lightly laughed to himself. "Yes, I do have a knack for this sort of thing, don't I?"

"Yeah, Plutarch," Haymitch stepped out the door, "You're a friggin' gem. Let's go."

*"Oh, you have no clue," Finnick didn't know if Plutarch missed Haymitch's sarcasm intentionally or not. "Wait until you see what I have planned for Katniss and Peeta's reunion propos. Now **that** will be something to talk about."*

"The kid is sick," Haymitch snapped. "Don't count on him performing for you anytime soon."

"I won't need him to perform. We've already wired his hospital room with recording devices so we could pick up a more...realistic version of Katniss, and now that we know what Peeta has gone through, I can't help but think of the brilliance of this plan."

"You mean you're...you're recording them without their knowledge?" Finnick stopped dead in his tracks.

"Don't be so surprised Finnick. We all know Katniss is at her best unscripted."

"Pull those cameras out of there," Haymitch shoved a finger into Plutarch's chest. "Those two have already gone through enough of that shit."

"I'm sorry, Haymitch, but President Coin thought it was a tremendous idea. I shall be monitoring them on my computer." Plutarch pushed a few buttons on the computer Haymitch held. "Here, now you can be privy to their reunion as well."

"I don't want to see this shit!" Haymitch yelled. "No one should be watching this!"

"I agree with Haymitch on this one Plutarch." Finnick took a step between Haymitch and the former Gamemaker. "We're supposed to be their friends...watching out for them...I for one don't feel comfortable with the idea of watching their private moments, and I know Katniss and Peeta would hate it."

"They'll have to get over it." Plutarch's good mood had yet to falter. "Really, you two should understand how important showing a united front between the two of them is for the rebellion. What I wouldn't give to capture Snow's reaction when he sees them together."

"That's it," Haymitch turned around. "I'm telling them."

"I wouldn't recommend that," Plutarch gave him a light warning. "Coin wants to keep knowledge of this to a minimum. I will be the only one watching their feeds...editing them. Well, other than you Haymitch." His eyes motioned to the computer. "If you feel there's something on there I shouldn't be seeing then feel free to tell me, but I can tell you, there's nothing I haven't seen of these two from their time spent at the Capitol." Plutarch headed towards the Command Center. "Let's go gentlemen. Our president awaits."

"How much did he hear?" Katniss lifted her worried face to Finnick's.

"Enough," Finnick glanced down at her stomach then back up again. "We thought it best to keep Peeta's list of demands, as well as a few other things to ourselves. Plutarch erased it, but he does have...enough footage of the two of you, Katniss."

"Like?" She asked.

He hated that he saw these things, but it was either watch and listen through Plutarch's earpiece or trust the former Head Gamemaker, and Haymitch refused to watch, but he did listen. "Let's just say, we saw you play an...intimate game of real or not real." Finnick could see the visible tension in Katniss' jaw, the way her idle fingers continually opened and closed. "Take this," he handed her a rope. "Tomorrow we'll get you your own, but for now you can use mine."

"Thanks," she wrapped the rope around her fingers.

"I'm sorry, Katniss. I really am."

Katniss nodded at him, her lips practically white from how tightly they were clenched. "I know."

"Haymitch and I were going to warn you as soon as that meeting was over, but then that broadcast from the Capitol came through and..." Finnick watched as her shoulders slumped. "You should get some sleep, Katniss. Why don't you lie down here," he suggested. "I wanted to take a little walk anyway." He was surprised when she let her body fall face down into the thin mattress and closed her eyes. "I'll sleep on the floor when I get back." Finnick had a destination to reach, and an idiot to chew out. Unfortunately Peeta never turned around when Finnick yelled at him. He didn't even flinch when Finnick ripped the paintbrush from his grasp. Instead Peeta reached for a new one and continued spreading colors across a canvas Finnick hadn't even bothered to glimpse at.

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Peeta lifted his eyes , ducked his chin downward, and stole a peek at Katniss as she exited from the elevator. The order to report to the new remake room, though every room was new to Peeta, had come in within minutes of their release from the bunkers of Thirteen.

"There he is," Haymitch walked up to Beetee. "Got it?"

"It's right here," a black uniform was handed to Peeta. "Alright kid, put this on and let's get this over and done with."

"Peeta, I shall show you how the uniform functions at a later date as well as this," Beetee handed him a heavy looking metal glove of sorts. "Right now all you'll need to know are the basics." He looked at Peeta expectantly. "Go ahead and slip it on."

"It's..." Peeta made a fist testing out the strange glove, "...light."

"Yes. It should feel like your very own skin," Beetee said proudly. "I won't go into all that I've done to create the weapon," Peeta's eyes flashed to Beetee's when he said, 'weapon.' "Suffice to say, your fingers will never lose their grip again."

"They're repaired," Peeta told him. "The Capitol fixed them for some reason," but he now knew it was so he'd have full strength when he was used as a weapon himself.

"Even better," Beetee said unaffected. "All you have to do is say good morning to it. It's designed to respond to your voice, and only your voice." Beetee waited. "Go ahead."

It was an odd request, but Peeta did as told. He held up the glove and hesitantly said, "Good morning." A slight vibration tingled his skin before it molded to his hand. "Holy cow," Peeta's brows shot up. "What does it do?"

"More than we have time to delve into," Beetee answered. "To shut it down simply say, goodnight. I would suggest doing that now and avoid turning it on while you and Katniss are filming your propos. It will provide your hand with exceptional strength, and we wouldn't want you to injure anyone. You'll need to train with it."

"Okay," Peeta held his gloved hand close to his mouth and said, "Goodnight." The glove released its hold and slipped easily off. "Will this fall off or anything?" He handed it back to Beetee.

"Not while it's on. Its weapons are built into the wrist, and parts of your Jabberjay uniform. Again, we'll go through training, but for now, it's time to suit up." Beetee showed Peeta how to get into and out of his suit with ease. "It's much easier than Katniss'. Hers has an extra metal plate over her abdomen. Cinna added on once...well that doesn't matter much anymore." Beetee flustered a bit. "I shall leave you in the hands of the prep team."

"Thanks," Peeta was ushered into a chair and overheard Finnick offering Katniss a sugar cube. He didn't know why it aggravated him so much, Finnick was in love with Annie, but Peeta felt a shocking surge of jealousy shoot through him at the man's offer.

"It helps the taste of the coffee," Finnick dumped some sugar and cream into the cup.

Katniss swirled a thin wooden stirrer around in the cup of warm liquid before taking her spot across from Peeta. She sipped at the cup

thinking the flavor had been greatly improved and how she could get used to the hot beverage.

"What are you drinking, Katniss?" Octavia gave her a concerned look.

"Coffee," Katniss was about to take a sip just as Octavia snatched it from her hand.

"That's not good for you. No caffeine."

"Why not?" Katniss argued trying to pull the cup back.

She had never seen Octavia get upset before, but she was decidedly perturbed with Katniss. "It's not good for..." Octavia glanced downward towards Katniss' abdomen, "...for your health. Stunts your growth."

"I'm done growing," Katniss reached for it again.

"Are you?" Octavia flashed another look at Katniss' belly.

"Oh," Katniss dropped her hand. "Well, I don't really like it anyway."

"Fabulous," Octavia's sunny disposition returned. "I'll be working on you while Venia takes care of Peeta, and Flavius will be working on Finnick and Gale. Now let's get to work."

Katniss caught Peeta's eye more than once in the short time span it took to do her hair in her trademark braid and apply a light dusting of makeup. They hadn't spoken since the incident in the Command Center and now they were supposed to act like they were madly in love while showing the destruction of Thirteen. She had no clue how he would pull it off, or how she would for that matter. Every time she looked at him she heard his voice blaming her for the damage they were about to highlight for the cameras. The small amount of breakfast she forced down that morning threatened to reappear

regardless of the cup of tea her mother prepared for her. Her nerves were getting the best of her while being in such close proximity to Peeta and not being able to reach out to him.

"Hey...oh, I thought you were alone," Gale spoke to Peeta. "Sorry. I'll catch up with you later."

"Come in," Peeta looked up to him as a brush was run through his hair. "Let me start by saying I'm sorry for what I did. It was uncalled for, and I apologize," Peeta's voice was steady, yet there was a hidden aggression within. The last thing on earth he wanted to do was apologize to Gale, but Haymitch had told him they needed to bury the hatchet during filming.

"Me too," Gale stepped closer to him. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. Just wanted to tell you..." Gale held out a hand to Peeta who stared at it for a few seconds before shaking it. "No hard feelings. We both screwed up, now let's put it behind us." Gale dropped Peeta's hand and walked towards Flavius. "They said I needed to see you."

"Yes, we'll need to hide these bruises on your face," Flavius held Gale's chin in his hand and examined his facial features. "I should be able to cover that cut in your lip as well. Take a seat."

Gale looked around the tiny room noticing the only two chairs in there were occupied. "Where?"

"You can have mine," Katniss stood up. "I'm done. I'll meet you out there," she said to no one in particular and left with Octavia.

"You two still on the outs?" Gale asked Peeta and got a glare in answer.

"That's none of your business." Peeta released the pent up frustration inside. "This isn't easy for me."

"No. Don't suppose it is." Gale gave Flavius a dirty look when the man pressed a little too hard on his bruise with a makeup sponge.

"I'm sitting here being made up while Effie has probably been killed," Peeta squeezed his eyes closed.

Gale gave him an inquisitive look. "Katniss wasn't kidding when she said Effie was like a mother to you, was she?"

"Effie Trinket *is* my mother," Peeta spoke to Gale harshly. "She's the closest thing to one I've ever had, so no...Katniss wasn't kidding when she said that."

"Does Snow know this?" Gale asked.

"Finished," Venia announced in the middle of their conversation.

"You'll need to find Plutarch so he can instruct you on your part of the propos," she said to Peeta then left.

"She helped me to escape...Snow's not an idiot. He'll figure it out." Peeta stood to leave, he could no longer pretend to be on speaking terms with the man.

"That's why she's still alive," Gale said as though he knew something Peeta didn't. "Snow won't be able to use her against you...either one of you if he killed her." Peeta stood with his back towards Gale listening intently. "He lost you...the only weapon he could use against Katniss, and now he's moved onto you and Finnick...using Annie and Effie to get the best of you."

Peeta's shoulders slumped as he walked from the remake room and was ushered by Haymitch towards Plutarch where Katniss waited for him. "So...what am I supposed to do here?"

"Finally," Plutarch appeared unaffected by the remains of the bombing, instead thrilled with the idea of having both the Mockingjay and the Jabberjay at his disposal. "Our fiery birds are united as one." Both Peeta and Katniss looked away from Plutarch's innocent comment. "Boggs will give you a brief tour of the damage where you will comment on the destruction, then Cressida will lead you to the Justice Building for the filming of your scripted portions." Plutarch handed them each a script. "Any questions?" They both shook their heads. "Wonderful!"

The effects of the Capitol's bombs on Thirteen's surface was far from wonderful. The top portion of the building where Katniss and Peeta's quarters were located in had severe damage. Katniss pointed it out for the camera. "That's the window in our bedroom," she said to Peeta. "That's where Buttercup slept, and..." she sucked in a breath when she saw the caved in roof that had belonged to her father in law's room. "That's where your dad's quarters were."

"Thank God he got out in time," Peeta stared at the room with no roof, bricks and stone scared with black char marks. "Looks like that's where the bomb hit," he turned from the wreckage, and walked further across the strange, new district. Each step bringing with it its own new horror.

Katniss lifted her fingers to her nose. "Do you smell that?"

"Burnt chicken," Peeta said of a chicken farm that had been blown to bits.

"No," Katniss walked in the opposite direction of where Boggs was headed, and Peeta followed.

"What is this?" Plutarch blurted out.

"Don't touch them!" Katniss yelled, preventing Plutarch from picking up one of the roses that had been showered across the woods of Thirteen. "They're for me," she turned her head.

"Snow," Peeta recognized the stench of the roses anywhere. "I think they're for both of us." He lifted his hand and said, "Good morning," to his gauntlet, remembering how Beetee had said his hand would be stronger, picked up a blood red rose, and squeezed until the rose had been crushed to bits. "Goodnight," he spoke softly then turned to find Katniss running away from him.

"Follow her," Plutarch's order went out to two cameramen, yet Peeta was the one on her heels.

"Katniss," his intentions of keeping his distance from her went out the window when he saw her bent over next to a tree. He stood by her side and fought the urge to rub gently between her shoulders...to speak words of comfort as she dealt with the side effects from a combination of their child and Snow's flowery message. He stood next to her, feet planted firmly on the ground and blocked the cameras from recording.

As the wave of nausea swept over Katniss she wanted desperately to reach out a hand and force Peeta to help her the way he had while in the arena. His focus was on something else, not her, but she couldn't blame him for that. Who would want to watch a girl throwing up? She stood upright, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and backed away from the tree. "I need some water," she said in a flat and even tone. Still Peeta didn't say or do a thing, just followed her like

Plutarch had directed him to, looking like a lost kitten in search of its mother. 'That's what he is,' she realized. 'He's like Buttercup when he was a kitten. Beaten within an inch of his life, then nursed back to health by a loving hand, like Prim had done.' Katniss thought about the story she had told Peeta when they were in the cave, about throwing Buttercup out of the house and the cat continually showing up in her house. 'He was in search of his mother...Prim. Like Peeta's in search of his mother...Effie.'

They were guided towards the wreckage of the Justice Building and directed to say their lines. They were simple enough, one or two sentences to the people of the districts encouraging them to fight on. Telling them that their Jabberjay had come home, and what happened in Thirteen was the result of it.

The corner of Peeta's lip began to twitch slightly as he swallowed the tears that built up inside him. He had told Katniss she was the reason for this, but the truth remained that he was the one that left Effie to face Snow on her own. He could have stayed instead of abandoning her, instead he allowed her to convince him he was much more important to the rebellion than she was to him. He could feel himself beginning to hyperventilate as the first tear spilled over his bottom lid, getting trapped in a cluster of long blond lashes, then finally rolling down his cheek. A distant look in his eyes, lips slightly parted, sucking in an excessive amount of air, and the realization that Effie was now being put through the sort of hell he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy, engulfed him as he dropped to his knees and sobbed.

Katniss' chin was jutted outward, lifted towards the gray sky looking as though the smoke from the bombs had stained it. Peeta was crying on his knees to the side of her. All she had to do was reach out and touch his shoulder...the top of his head...anything to comfort him. A tiny breath escaped from her lungs as a lone mockingjay flew across the

top of the Justice Building, a repeat performance of the footage the Capitol had been using for years in their reports of Thirteen. The same footage she saw the day she and Peeta got married. Her hand reached blindly, landing on the soft downy curls of Peeta's head. He dipped his head, pulling it away from her, and she sucked in a breath. She clutched her locket, closed her eyes and wept for all that Snow had taken from her...Peeta. Finally, Katniss mourned the loss of her husband.

"What's wrong with them?" Plutarch asked Haymitch, but it was Gale that answered.

"They know now...the extent that Snow will go to break them."

The sound of Finnick's sobs came from behind Haymitch who turned and walked off the set without saying a word. There was a war being waged across a nation. The rebels were close to victory, but this particular battle had been won by Snow.

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 13: Promises Kept, a

hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twelve: Promises Kept

Previously, Effie shot Mr. Tanner so Peeta could escape, then was taken prisoner by Snow. Peeta's hijacking has had some lasting effects, and now he's got to come to grips with his actions since being in Thirteen.

Sorry it took so long to get out, but I caught the flu and was in bed for a week. To those of you out there that are sick, and I know there are plenty of you, eat soup! Drink liquids! Have jello, and get better soon.

Those of you that are Outtakes fans (rated M for adult content) the first chapter of MJ: BWO has been posted and chapter two will be out tomorrow or the day after. Please be 18 or older if you want to read that. They are intimate moments of K/P's lives that go hand in hand with the series.

Thanks to all of you that wait...read...review, and anticipate. I am humbled by your kind words. Thanks to S and A for their hard work and the double beta job. And thanks to my scout who

inspired many of Steven Tanner's qualities. This one's for you baby.

If you want to know what's happening with the stories or anything else that I've been working on, please follow me on tumblr at [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com).

Want to know what's happening in...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

Watching Dr. Valero give Peeta a shot in the arm, and seeing him fall instantaneously into a world of unconsciousness brought on even more tears. Katniss stood on the steps of Thirteen's Justice Building, arms clinging to herself, wishing they were Peeta's providing her with a sense of security instead. Many tried to calm her down, unlike Peeta and Finnick, she had to face the tragedy of her life without the aid of drugs, but no one could snap her back to reality. Words of common sense were spoken to her by her mother, Prim, Regina...Gale, but Katniss wanted nothing to do with them. No one could understand what she was going through. No one knew what it was like to have the person you loved more than life itself, taken from you. Even Regina and Justus, who had gone through their own personal hell at the hands of Snow, couldn't relate to her situation. They still had one another. They were married, and looking forward to the arrival of their little boy, Adam, but Katniss dreaded the thought of giving birth. She loved the baby, but what she didn't love was how much the child would lose out on. If given a choice, she'd choose Peeta as the parent, not herself. Love was not something she knew how to express very easily. It had taken Peeta years to worm his way into her heart, and Gale, who had always been there for her, who showed her love in his own way, was never able to reach that part of her. The only person she had ever loved openly, other than Peeta, was Prim, but this wasn't

something Prim could relate to, nor would Katniss want to subject her sister to this form of hell. It wasn't until Haymitch's arrival, coming back from God knows where he disappeared to, that Katniss allowed herself to crumble into his arms. She had never had a very close relationship with her mentor, she loved him, he was part of her family now, but opening up to him...sharing with him, was very rare. In fact the only time she ever recalled allowing him a glimpse into the recesses of her heart was when he came to her quarters asking her...*her* for advice on how to live without Effie. Her mentor's arms weren't as strong as Peeta's even in his weakened state. They didn't bring with them the feeling of safety, but they did hold understanding, for he was the only person, other than Peeta and Finnick, who could relate to what she was going through. Losing the one you loved...the one person that you let yourself open up to, that you willingly gave your soul to, then having that person ripped from you by President Snow, was not something she wished on anyone, yet she was momentarily grateful there was someone near who had experienced her same pain.

"Come on sweetheart," Haymitch held his arm around Katniss' shoulders, "let's go to the hospital where they took Peeta."

"He doesn't want to see me," she sniffed out, running her fingers under her nose.

"He's knocked out cold. He won't even know you're there." Haymitch led her to the medical center where Peeta was changed into a hospital gown, and put in bed. "Finnick's behind that curtain," Haymitch gestured with his chin across the room to another section where her former ally lay in a drug induced sleep. "They've got a bed here for you too. Doc wants to check you out first though, okay?"

Katniss stared at Peeta's sleeping form, wanting desperately to climb in bed with him and let herself drift into a peaceful slumber as she had before. Since leaving the first arena, laying with him was the only way she could sleep peacefully, but even those nights were few and far between. "I don't want to be in this room if Plutarch's cameras are in here," Katniss glared around the room for hidden devices.

"They're not in here. I made sure you were put in a different room." Haymitch led her to the edge of the waiting hospital bed. "You go ahead and change into that gown there," he pointed to the thin cotton garment that matched the ones Peeta and Finnick were wearing. "I'm going to send in the doc so she can check you out, then I want you to try and get some rest," he said as he pulled the curtain closed to give her some privacy.

"Easier said than done," Katniss mumbled as she sat down and began removing her mockingjay uniform, running her fingers over the pin that had found a permanent home there now.

Regina gave her a full examination, drawing blood, checking her vital signs, and using one of Thirteen's fetal monitoring systems to listen to the baby's heart rate, the worried frown went unnoticed by her patient, then the physician tucked Katniss into bed as though she were the baby herself, before asking her a series of questions. "How much of your rations have you been eating lately?"

"Enough," Katniss' one word answers were all she could manage to get out.

"And how much have you been drinking?" Regina prepared to place a tube in Katniss' arm to provide her with fluids.

With a shrug of a shoulder, Katniss answered, "Enough." The cups of tea her mother provided her with prior to each meal was about all she

had been able to stomach since the night she watched the broadcast and Peeta cut her out of his life.

"What about sleep, Katniss?" Regina was growing frustrated. "Been getting...*enough* of that as well?"

An angry set of gray eyes slanted in the dim hospital room towards the doctor. "Yeah," she said with a chill in her voice.

Dr. Valero avoided pleasantries while inserting the IV into Katniss' vein. "Lack of appetite, high blood pressure, partially dehydrated, exhaustion...the baby's heart rate dropping," that seemed to get Katniss' attention. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to lose this baby." Dr. Valero adjusted something on the machine that held the bag of fluids that would provide liquid nourishment to Katniss' dehydrated body. "Go to sleep, or maybe I'll help you out in the process and give you something to knock you out. It might hurt the baby...it might not," the doctor spoke to her in a nonchalant tone. "I'll check on you in a few hours."

Katniss stared at her as she walked away realizing that her new friend Regina hadn't been in the room with her at all, but Dr. Valero, who was clearly lecturing Katniss, in not so many words, that her parenting skills left much to be desired. She flopped onto the flat of her back, the arm without the tube in it, thrown over her eyes as though doing so would block out the terrible images that flashed behind her closed lids. "Sleep?" She whispered to herself, rolling over, facing the flimsy material used to separate her from Peeta. There was no need for drugs. No need to put foreign chemicals into her bloodstream. There was only one thing she needed to fall asleep, and he was a few feet away, laying behind a curtain.

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Something sharp pierced his arm and within seconds Peeta drifted into darkness. Nightmares plagued him yet no matter how hard he tried to wake from the disturbing images his eyes wouldn't open. Horrific sounds of Johanna screaming as she was being dunked into a tub of ice cold water haunted him. Peeta could see himself curled up on the floor of the jail cell, his hands covering his ears, his lips moving, talking to someone that wasn't there, the picture of insanity. Moving his lips, having a conversation with an invisible stranger was the only thing that kept him from going crazy. The sounds of Johanna's screams had vanished replaced with one of Katniss whimpering in her sleep. Peeta's eyes flew open, darting around the dark hospital room, he had no idea how long he had been out. A feathery sensation tickled him just below his nose, and he blew the few loose hairs away wondering where they had come from. Something, 'No,' he corrected himself, 'someone,' warm was curled up against his side with her leg thrown over his, her head resting against his chest and her fingers, clutching onto his hospital gown. It took a few minutes for him to determine if this was really happening, or if he went from a nightmare to a dream in the span of seconds. A feeling of wetness seeped through the dressing gown he was wearing, Katniss began scrambling against him, trying to crawl up his body like she was running away from something. "Real," he whispered to himself. His first instinct was to wake her and kick her out of his room for fear of suddenly snapping and killing her, his second was to sneak out of there without disturbing her, but it was his third, natural instinct he went with. "Shh," he stroked

the back of her head, whispering soft words to her, "it's a nightmare. It's only a dream. You're safe now. I've got you." Her breathing slowed down, her hands gradually flattened against his chest, and the tiny cries for help he was sure she was trying to get out, turned into a sigh as the nightmare dissipated into an unknown abyss. By all rights he should have left that very second, but the fact was, he needed to feel her as much as she needed him. He closed his eyes trying to decide whether or not he should wake her, going through several options in his head. He had heard what the doctors said about the reason for his explosions, and why Gale got the brunt of it, but he didn't believe for a second that Katniss was out of the woods and safe from his dangerously hostile bouts of violence.

"How are you feeling?" His father walked slowly up to Peeta after waking from the blow he got on the back of his head during his fight with Gale.

"Da...dad?" Peeta's voice was full of confusion. Things were still so hazy, and trying to decipher if he was awake or not was too difficult to figure out on his own. "Is that you?"

Bing reached out to his son, "It's me, Peeta."

"Where's mom?" Peeta asked as he rested his head against the pillow.

"Don't you remember, Peeta? She didn't make it," his father said with remorse in his voice.

Peeta sucked in a breath then he saw her. "Mom!"

Evelyn and Prim stood at the doorway hesitating to enter the room.

"Hi," Evelyn gave him a small smile.

"Dad said you..." Peeta turned to his father, "...she's real, right? She's there?"

"Of course she is," his dad answered.

*"Then why did you say mom died?" The expression on his father's face told him what he needed to know. His real mother was dead. "Oh," Peeta gulped. **She** died. That's Katniss' mom."*

"May we come in?" Evelyn asked from her spot next to the door.

"Yeah." Peeta peered around the room, "Where's Whytte...Miche?"

His father's face drooped, "I'm sorry, son. They...they're gone too."

It took a minute for it to register. Peeta's brothers...his real mother, were dead, and his father saved... "You told me already didn't you? You rescued Katniss' family during the firebombs?"

Bing held his chin up a little and faced Peeta. "Yes," he answered.

"I...I asked you to, right?" Peeta knew it was true. The only way his father would've abandoned his brothers was to help the one son that required it his whole life long. "You saved them for me?"

"I saved them because it was the right thing to do," Bing answered.

"I'm sorry, pops," Peeta felt like there was a two ton weight sitting in the middle of his chest. Like he had personally murdered his brothers.

"Nothing to be sorry for. The Capitol is responsible for the bombing of Twelve...not you. Not Katniss."

"Peeta," Prim was standing within reaching distance with a tray full of medical supplies. "I need to treat your head, make sure it's not bleeding or anything."

"Oh, sure," he sat upright and ducked his head down, shame written all over his face for the way he had treated Katniss. It didn't matter who Katniss was, the fact that he couldn't remember his love for her, or what she may or may not have done, the way he acted was beyond reproach. Pangs of guilt assaulted his senses when he thought of accidentally hitting her. All he wanted to do was forget it ever happened, but the throbbing pain in the back of his head was more than enough to remind him what had happened when he overheard the conversation between Katniss and Gale.

"We'll need to discuss Peeta's medical condition," Dr. Valero stepped towards the family. "I'll get Beetee, and we'll let you know what options we have."

The sight of his former ally, entering the hospital room brought a smile to Peeta's lips. "Beetee, you look like hell."

"So do you, Peeta," the man stuck his hand out and shook it with gusto. "But I believe we should be able to remedy that situation," Beetee said encouragingly.

"Katniss?" Peeta asked wondering why she wasn't there, then realized she probably didn't want a thing to do with him. 'Her not being in the room is probably a good thing,' he thought to himself.

"We thought it best that she stay out of the room for now," Dr. Valero answered.

"First, let me take a moment to say, thank goodness for Effie Trinket's resourcefulness. Had she not gotten Peeta out of Snow's grasp, he

would either be dead by now or have had his memory completely wiped out, and turned into a weapon against Katniss and the rebellion. So let's try and look at the bright side as we discuss Peeta's condition." Peeta had a feeling Beetee's words were the prelude to some pretty devastating news. "As you can see there are several canisters on the counter containing various chemical compounds. One," Beetee pointed to it, "is tracker jacker venom created to be administered into a person's blood stream. According to Effie, you have had doses of this Peeta, and during such times the Capitol took memories of your life and altered them. When they filled you with false information regarding Katniss...showed you the recordings, they were working towards their goal."

"What goal?" Bing asked.

"That Peeta would develop a hatred for Katniss. They started a process better known as hijacking. They tried to replace Peeta's good memories with his worst nightmares." Beetee took a moment to explain the situation as he had to Katniss before he entered the room. "Your recall is made difficult because memories haven't simply been changed, but distorted into horrific images." He tapped at his forehead, "They're brought to the forefront of your mind, altered, and saved again in the revised form." The look of confusion on Peeta's face had Beetee going further into detail, "Peeta, do you have any good memories of Katniss?"

Their greeting in the tunnel popped into his mind. "Yeah."

"Would you mind sharing with us?" Beetee asked.

"Um..." he blushed slightly, "She kissed me when I saw her in the tunnel."

*"Perfect," Beetee strolled to the center of the room and began his explanation. "Imagine kissing Katniss in the tunnel," he turned to Peeta. "I'll assume that's a very pleasant memory for you, but now I want you to imagine that I gave you a dose of tracker jacker venom, not enough to induce a three day blackout, but enough to infuse you with doubt...fear, then told you that Katniss didn't **kiss** you in the tunnel, but made an attempt on your life...instead of running into your arms with joy, she ran to you and tried to choke you...kill you. Now, your happy memory of Katniss coming up on you in the tunnel will be doctored. In its place is the memory of Katniss trying to execute you, and **that** is what would be stored in your permanent memory bank."*

"So that's what they did? Took his memories of Katniss and distorted them so he's...scared of her?" Prim questioned.

"That's what they attempted to do, yes," Beetee nodded.

"But they didn't succeed," Dr. Valero added.

"Because Effie switched out the drug," it was more of a statement that came from Peeta instead of a question.

"Exactly. The jacker juice is much weaker than the actual venom," Beetee told them.

"So how do we reverse this?" Prim tapped the tip of her foot on the floor waiting for an answer.

Beetee exchanged a look with Dr. Valero before saying, "There is very little information on hijacking, but what we do know is...once the damage is done...it's permanent."

*Peeta gripped the edge of his bed. "So...I'll never remember...**anything** ever again?"*

"We're not sure about that, Peeta," Dr. Valero flashed a somewhat condemning look towards Beetee. "You see, the jacker juice Effie substituted is a recreational drug that was created for the people in the Capitol. You've heard of morphling, yes?" Everyone nodded. "Think of this as a combination of morphling and tracker jacker venom. It has the ability to produce hallucinations like the actual venom, it's exceptionally addictive, yet provides a more..." she turned to Beetee for a second, then back to Peeta, "...it should give you a feeling of pleasure. That's one of the reasons it's in high demand in the Capitol, but has been outlawed due to the side effects. Getting the drug out of your system should be much easier since Effie sent in the syringes full of the agent that counteracts it. The problem is...jacker juice can induce similar effects as the actual tracker jacker venom...long term memory loss and bouts of violent behavior."

"Which is why you attacked Gale earlier," Beetee added. "I'm unsure of why you failed to take your animosity out on Katniss, but something prevented you from doing it."

"You said that my memories were brought to the forefront and altered after being given the drug, right?" Peeta asked and Beetee nodded. "Well, Effie used to tell me that Snow was lying...about how much I loved Katniss. After they dosed me, Johanna...Annie, they all told me about her, but no one ever mentioned Gale."

"Aaaah," Beetee tapped at his chin. "That could explain it, don't you think doctor?"

"Absolutely," She nodded. "If Peeta was told, immediately after being drugged, contradictory information pertaining to his relationship with Katniss, but not Gale, then it stands to reason that the person his aggression would be taken out on is Gale."

"And Snow. Though I wouldn't rule Katniss out completely." Beetee added.

"He may get upset with her, however, if he were going to attack her I believe he would have done so when he came upon her and Gale..." Dr. Valero and Beetee began speaking privately to one another away from the group and looking over the canisters, and syringes that were sent to them.

*"I might as well look at your head now," Prim gestured towards a chair for Peeta to sit in away from her mother and his father. Once he took a seat she said, "I am very...**very** upset with you, and before you say anything, I know what Snow did to you, but did you have to tell Katniss you wanted a divorce? Do you have any idea how much you hurt her?"*

"I didn..."

Prim stood in front of him with a hand perched on her hip much like her sister. "I'm not through speaking yet."

"Sorry," Peeta mumbled.

"She has been suffering too Peeta, maybe not being abused the way you have, but you should know more than anyone that a person doesn't need to be physically beaten to be battered, and Katniss has been a battered woman being here without you. Did you know she walked around this place moving her lips, talking to herself, thinking you could hear her? She thought if she stopped you wouldn't be able to feel her with you...to know that she was thinking of you. She actually believed she was helping you through your torture. The only reason she's not doing it now is because Dr. Valero gave her a book to write in so Katniss wouldn't completely lose her mind, which she was pretty close to doing."

"Prim, I didn't know what I was saying when I told her I wanted a divorce."

"No, Peeta...I think you did. I think you knew exactly what you were saying and you wanted to hurt her as much as you were hurting." Peeta felt the pressure of Prim's fingers at the base of his skull and grimaced. "It's just a lump, and the doctor says you don't have a concussion, so you'll be fine. Probably have a headache, but that's about it."

"Thanks," Peeta made to stand, but Prim put her hand on his shoulder holding him in place.

*"I still didn't say I was through yet," she scolded him. "I was at your wedding Peeta along with my mother, Haymitch, your father, Madge and Mayor Undersee. Other than the day you and Katniss came back as victors, it was the happiest day of my life. I watched you two get married...**legally** married by Mayor Undersee," she threw him an accusatory look, "and all I could think of was how lucky the two of you were to have found each other. How Katniss had spent her entire life telling me she never wanted to get married...warning me that loving someone was dangerous, that it didn't accomplish a thing other than bring people suffering and pain, yet there she stood, doing the exact thing she spent her life telling me not to do, because you two loved each other so much you were willing to risk everything to get married in Twelve instead of the Capitol. So you think about that the next time you decide you're going to ask my sister for a divorce." Prim stopped herself before turning away from him, and said much more gently, "You were supposed to be the one person in the world that didn't hurt her. Don't prove my sister's theories on falling in love right, Peeta."*

Dr. Valero entered the hospital room on tiptoes being extra careful not to disturb her patients. "Oh," she spoke quietly when she saw Peeta's blue eyes gleaming back at her. "You're awake."

"Katniss," Peeta spoke gently to her when she started crying in her sleep. "It's okay. It's just a dream, Katniss." He told himself he needed to climb out of bed, to unwrap his arms that were clinging to her like a life preserver.

"If you wouldn't mind letting her sleep, I'd appreciate it," Dr. Valero spoke softly and stood at the edge of Peeta's bed. "We couldn't give her a sedative like we could you, and she was quite upset."

"Why is she in here?" Peeta asked.

Dr. Valero pointed to the drapes that separated him from Finnick and Katniss' empty bed. "We thought it best if we kept all three of you in here together. As far as why she's in bed with you...I can only imagine that she wanted to sleep with her husband after being without you for so long."

"Weren't you afraid I'd hurt her?" Peeta was petrified of it.

Dr. Valero let out a small sigh. "I am somewhat afraid of that, however, she seems to think you'd rather die than cause her any physical harm, and...I don't know..." she ran a hand over her swollen abdomen, "...maybe it wasn't the soundest medical decision I've ever made when I saw that she had climbed into bed with you, but the woman...the expectant mother in me, completely understood."

"Peeta?" Katniss spoke in her sleep, her hands reaching upward into the air trying to grab at something that didn't exist.

"Shh," he took hold of them and brought them back down to his chest, "I'm right here. Go to sleep."

"Was I wrong, Peeta?" Dr. Valero gave him a concerned look. "Do you think you're going to hurt her?"

In that moment, all he wanted to do was hold Katniss for the rest of his life. "Not right now, but I might...I could, couldn't I?"

"I suppose so," she pulled up a small stool on wheels and sat close to him. "But who's to say she won't fall down a flight of stairs and break her neck tomorrow, or that she'll go out to film one of those propos and wind up in the middle of a battle again, only this time getting killed in the process." Regina set her hand on the bed's metal frame. "The point is, none of us can predict the future. You and Katniss are living proof of that. You entered the first arena thinking only one of you...probably both of you would wind up dead, yet you both won. You thought you'd never have to face the arena again, yet there you were in the middle of the Quell... Get the picture?"

"Yeah," Peeta was starting to feel like a complete ass for the way he had treated Katniss, but that still didn't mean he should cave into his feelings and start up a relationship with her again however, he definitely needed to apologize. "I said some pretty horrible things to her."

"Yes, but you should give yourself a little break. Some things you simply cannot avoid, and blaming Katniss for the bombing of Thirteen was one of those things."

"I've been cruel...hateful." He didn't know what other way to put it.

"You've been vengeful," she corrected him. "Your mind has been deceiving you, and when you lose control of your own faculties, it

preys upon the images you were shown, the things you were told, thus causing you to act like..." she searched for a term he could understand.

"Like a son of a bitch," he grinned at her.

She chuckled lightly. "Like a son of a bitch," she agreed, "but Peeta, these things are not your fault."

"Is there any way I'll ever get back what I lost?" If there was, then maybe he and Katniss stood an actual chance at a future.

"Beetee and I have been trying to come up with some sort of solution, we've examined everything Effie has sent to us, and the fact remains, we have no idea if we can reverse this. The only thing we have been able to accomplish is to work the venom out of your system, but the damage has already been done, and the treatments Effie sent along will no longer be of any help," Dr. Valero had a defeatist expression across her face.

"Will I go through withdrawals anymore?"

"You shouldn't, but..."

"But I can still explode at any given time," Peeta let out a breath of frustration. "I need to get out of here, Dr. Valero. If she wakes up and I do something to her..." He noticed the doctor's pregnant belly and said, "...and I think it's best if you don't treat me anymore either. I'd hate it if you were on the end of one of my fits."

"There's no need for concern. You didn't know me prior to arriving in Thirteen, so you have no ill feelings towards me," Regina lowered her voice down so as not to disturb Katniss. "The majority of your anger extends towards Gale, and thanks to Effie, President Snow, but you

do have a great deal of pent up frustration towards Katniss, and the only way to work through that is to work with her. Find out about your life, things you and she knew that no one else did."

Peeta gave her an inquisitive look. "Thought you said the side effects were irreversible?"

"They are, but," she gave him a tiny grin, "there's no harm in trying to remember. Try to live life like you used to. Ask Katniss about your life...do the things you normally did before, and who knows what might happen."

"And what happens if we're in the middle of living our...*normal* life, and I have an episode?" The expression on the doctor's face said it all. "Yeah, that's what I thought. I'm no good for her, or for the baby." Peeta started to slide his arm from beneath Katniss in order to leave, but her grip on him only tightened. "Dr. Valero, I'm not comfortable staying in here like this with her." He paused before admitting out loud, "It's too hard. Knowing I have to keep my distance from her...from the baby...I can't be here."

Regina gave it a little thought then asked, "Are you planning on being a father to this child?"

"Of course," Peeta said with quiet shock. "I'm not going to leave her on her own to deal with this, but...I can't continue our relationship. Guess you could say I'll be a silent father. One that hides in the background so his family can actually have a decent life, and once she doesn't need me anymore, I'll step out of the picture. I have to end this relationship with her before things go any further."

Regina shook her head from side to side, "I think you're making a big mistake."

"No offense, but you don't know me. The only thing you know about me is what you've heard from Katniss and what you've seen on television, so don't assume I'm making a mistake." All Peeta wanted to do was protect Katniss and the baby, and the last thing he needed was some doctor trying to make him feel guilty for being responsible.

Regina lifted her chin and said, "Fair enough. Then may I ask, are you willing to help her now?"

"Suppose so," Peeta answered wondering what the doctor had in mind.

"Then stay put and let her sleep. Going through all this stress has been very difficult on Katniss. She hasn't been eating or drinking properly, her blood pressure has been high and the baby's heart rate continues to drop, which concerns me. So I'm asking you, not only as her physician, but as her friend, let Katniss have this, Peeta. Go back to sleep, and allow Katniss and the baby to get the rest they both so desperately need."

A surge of panic rushed through him. "Why...what...wh..." He reached a hand out to the physician, squeezing her arm. "Is it because of me?"

"She's been under a great deal of stress, and I'm sure your situation doesn't help any," Regina stood up. "If you're planning on delivering the news to her that you'd like a separation, I'm going to ask that you wait until I can monitor the baby. Good night, Peeta."

"Wait," Peeta quietly called out to her, careful not to move too much. "What if...if I stayed...just during the pregnancy...with guards," he began thinking out loud, "there would always have to be guards around just in case...would that help her?"

"It might, but I can't guarantee that either," the physician informed him. "The fact is, some women deal with certain types of stress perfectly fine, yet others..." Regina took her seat again. "In Katniss' case, put her in a life and death situation, threaten a loved one...anything like that, there's a side of her that comes out, the side I believe will make a wonderful mother, and protects the ones she loves. She can stare down the face of danger without thinking twice about it," The doctor fumbled with the edge of the sheet for a moment then said, "However, when it comes to matters of the heart, she seems to falter. I wish I could say for certain that having the man she left in the arena back would solve her problems, but I don't think they will, because..." The doctor gave him a look that clearly read pity, "...that's just not who you are anymore."

"At least we agree on that." Peeta glanced down at Katniss' sleeping face, then back up to the doctor. "What do I do?"

"I can't answer that, but I don't think running away from your problems is the answer."

"And when I feel all that..." Peeta gripped the side of the bed sheets in his fists, "...that anger building up inside of me? Then what? How do I protect her then?"

"For now, I don't see any reason why we can't do as you suggested and keep guards posted. If you two would like to be alone, then I'm sure Gale Hawthorne would be happy to provide Katniss with a gun, and she can simply shoot you."

Peeta stared at the doctor's blank expression until the woman cracked a smile, and he joined her feeling a bit of the tension lift. "That's okay. I think I'll pass on that." He paused for a moment then said, "I'll need some time to decide whether or not being with her is for the best."

"I don't want to pressure you, but she needs to start taking better care of herself, and right now all she's doing is spending her time worrying about you...what's going to happen between the two of you. You'll need to make this choice sooner rather than later."

"In other words, if I don't try and work things out with her, she won't deal with it well, which could hurt the baby?" Regina gave her shoulder a noncommittal shrug. "Do I really have any other choice but to stay?" He knew the answer before he even asked the question.

Regina gave his hand a pat, "Get some sleep, Peeta. You both need the rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Yeah...sure. G'night. Hey, Dr. Valero, would you mind leaving that little light on?" He asked, afraid of what the dark would bring. Peeta stood staring at the shadows on the wall for several minutes trying to decide what to do. "I'm sorry," he moved his lips and spoke to a sleeping Kantiss. "This whole time all I wanted to do was protect you, and I did the exact opposite." His eyes drifted closed then flew open. "It was you," his lips barely moved. "I was talking to you in the jail cell." A tiny burst of air escaped as a soft smile played upon the corner of his lips. Peeta knew what he was going to do, and promised himself that he'd start once Katniss had woken up, not knowing that she already had.

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Effie awoke with a thumping headache on the chilly concrete floor of a Capitol jail cell. Across from her Annie sat with her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth mumbling to herself, and next to her...

"Johanna?" The cell was empty, but the sounds of Johanna's yells came through a tiny vent above Effie's head. "Oh, Johanna," she sighed.

"About time you woke up," a very familiar voice spoke to her.

"Mr. Tanner!" Effie stood to her feet, and fell slightly backwards from being lightheaded. "You're alive."

Her personal Peacekeeper moved closer to the bars that separated them. "No thanks to you," he said angrily. "Our president thought he should have a guard on his side that hated you as much as he does. You know...someone that would actually enjoy spilling your blood." Effie let out a little gasp. "I'm being sworn in to his elite squad tomorrow." Steven's expression was one of disdain when he spoke to Effie. He gave her a deadly glare, "President Snow just wanted you to know who it is you'll be dealing with from now on." Steven tugged on the metal studded gloves he wore. "If you'll excuse me, I have a rebel from District Seven to pay a visit to."

The room where Johanna Mason had spent much of her time being water tortured was of average size for a holding cell. No bars, only cement walls and a round built in tub of water, deep enough to hold her dangling body underwater without her feet touching the ground. As Steven Tanner entered he saw two female hands tied to a large wooden structure the Peacekeepers used to hang her from, struggling against the thick rope binding her to it. Water splashed everywhere as two Peacekeepers stood talking amongst themselves about how long their prisoner could hold her breath before passing out. "Shane,

Lockhead," Steven greeted the pair. "Pull her up. Snow wants to see her."

"That's not the order I was given," Shane spoke forcefully. "We were told to question her until she spoke or died."

Steven stood nose to nose with the guard and said in a low growl, "How long have you been appointed to the elite guard?"

"I'm not in the elite guard," he answered.

"Well, I am," Steven snapped forcefully. "Now pull her up, or it'll be you I'm taking to Snow!"

"Yes, sir," both Peacekeepers spoke at once then turned to pull up a no longer struggling Johanna.

"I think she's dead," Lockhead said with a bit of concern. "You killed her Shane!"

"Don't look at me. I wasn't the one that wanted to see how long she could stay under!"

Steven walked slowly up to Johanna, took the knife out of his belt and sliced her free, catching her sopping wet body in his hands and resting her down on the ground.

"Should we get medical, sir?" Lockhead asked.

Steven turned his fierce glare towards the pair. "If you want to sign your own death warrant and try to get to medical in time, go right ahead, but I'm not going to take the heat for this!" Steven walked towards the pair, "Stand guard outside. Let me see if I can rig this to look like an accident."

Lockhead headed out the door, thoughts of the brutal deaths Snow was capable of his motivation. "Come on Shane."

Steven stood toe to toe with Shane, "You're wasting time. Move," he spoke with authority to the Capitol born guard and stared him down until he exited. The moment the door shut Steven rushed to Johanna's side, performing the basic first aid training he was taught when being promoted to personal security detail. That was the only reason a Peacekeeper was provided with life saving techniques. "Come on, Mason. Don't die on me." He pumped at her heart, lifted her head back and blew, repeated the process over and over again until Johanna coughed up the water that had filled her lungs.

"Hey Hagar," she rasped out.

"Christ. Don't do that to me again," Steven sat next to her on the floor. "Stay down, and don't talk or we're both dead." He took about ten seconds before saying, "Okay, I'm carrying you out of here, and when I do, I need you to act like you're barely alive. Don't speak, hang your head...whatever it is that people who are barely alive do. Got it?" Johanna started to open her mouth but Steven covered it with his hand and said, "You want to get out of the Capitol dead, or alive?"

"Alive," she mumbled behind his hand.

"Then for once in your life, shut up and listen Mason." He lifted her from her spot, and Johanna let herself lay limp in his arms. "Okay," Steven spoke more to himself than her. "Game time," he kept his posture straight, his back stiff, and pounded on the door with his boot. "Open up."

Shane opened the door and noticed Johanna in his arms. "What the hell are you doing with her?"

"I was about to shred the rope, and she coughed out a bunch of water. I'm taking her to medical before we lose her." He started down the hall. "You're dismissed. I'll take care of it from here. Tell medical you two cut her down before she drowned." Giving them credit for saving Johanna's life was risky, but the Capitol bred Peacekeeper might overlook the gesture, the idea of being praised by higher ups in the Capitol being too tempting.

"Good luck, Tanner," Shane called out to him as he and Lockhead walked in the opposite direction, and Steven almost breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Hey, Hagar," Johanna opened one eye and whispered to him. "Where the hell are you taking me?"

"Shut up Johanna," he whispered harshly. Once both guards were gone he headed towards a section of wall next to the elevator that took them one floor down to the jail cells. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah," Johanna felt herself wobble a bit, but hung onto his arm to keep her steady. "Where the...holy shit," her eyes opened wide. "What the hell is that?" She watched as a section of wall next to the elevator vanished and was led into a corridor.

"This is the passage that leads to the jail cells...to your escape." Steven pulled a small radio out of his vest and handed it to Johanna. "Effie forgot to send this with Peeta. I don't think she even remembered she had it." He pulled his metal studded glove off and pulled off a thin white one he wore beneath. "Man, what the hell did they do to you?" He pressed it against a cut across her chest and heard Johanna suck a deep breath in between her teeth.

"That hurts," she complained.

"Quit your bitching Johanna. I don't like whiny women."

"They're gonna find out what you did brainless. You should've just let me stay dead." Johanna dropped to the floor out of sheer exhaustion. "Once they find out you rescued me from those two guards..."

"I'm going to hide you," he interrupted her.

"And how the hell do you think you're going to hide me? It's not like I'm going to fit into your pocket and you can walk out with me."

"Shut up, Johanna." Steven checked up and down the corridor. "I don't want to leave you here, but I have to. I've got to get Annie and Effie out."

"Great!" Johanna bitched. "You're going to get us all killed!"

"No I'm not!" Steven was so frustrated with her he was visibly shaking. "Johanna, they're coming," He knelt down next to her. "The rebels...they're coming for you. I heard the radio broadcast this morning." He lifted the tiny device to her. "They've got everything coordinated down to the minute, with the exception of one thing...how to get the three of you in one place."

"Four," Johanna corrected. "They've got Portia somewhere in here too."

"Portia..." Steven held his head down. "I'm sorry Johanna, but getting her out is too risky. She's under too much surveillance."

"And the jails aren't?" Johanna countered.

"Not anymore. Effie and Annie aren't much of a threat." Steven stood up and looked at his watch. "I've got ten minutes before they land. Can you listen to the radio...quietly," he accentuated the word. "If

something changes...if they run into trouble...anything, I need you to tell me."

"Where are you going?" Johanna tried to stand, but her body was too worn out.

Steven stood proud and answered, "To keep my oath and save the life of Effie Trinket."

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Katniss awoke to voices attempting to speak quietly, and failing miserably. She sat up in Peeta's bed who was nowhere to be found. She glanced down at her hand and noticed the IV that had been providing her with fluids had been removed, and the bracelet that monitored the baby's vital signs had been put back on. The sight of the bandage on her hand made her think of Regina, and suddenly a dam of memories broke through her morning haze flooding her with a mixture of resentment, distress, and the need to protect herself from Peeta's upcoming act of benevolence.

Regina's voice was quiet, but serious, "I don't want to pressure you, but she needs to start taking better care of herself, and right now all she's doing is spending her time worrying about you...what's going to happen between the two of you. You'll need to make this choice sooner rather than later."

"In other words, if I don't try and work things out with her, she won't deal with it well, which could hurt the baby?" Katniss didn't hear Regina answer. "Do I really have any other choice but to stay?"

'He wants to end things with me. Fine. I don't want him to stay out of pity,' Katniss thought to herself. She stopped before letting out a sigh. 'He *might* stay,' the voice in her head sounded almost pathetic to her. 'Yeah, for the baby's sake.' She made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a grumble alerting her present company that she was able to face the day.

"Wonderful, she's awake," Plutarch's high spirits always got on her nerves. "Let's wait for Peeta and then I can fill you all in."

"Fill us in on what?" Katniss draped her legs over the edge of the bed.

Finnick took a spot next to Katniss. "I've been asking him for thirty minutes now, but he won't say a thing until Peeta gets here."

"Okay, I'm here. What do you want?" Peeta entered with Dr. Valero in tow a few seconds later. His voice was no longer hard, but he had yet to make eye contact with Katniss.

"They're getting them out," Plutarch said with a pleased expression across his face. "Boggs is leading a rescue mission," Plutarch's facial features changed. "Unfortunately lives will be lost and covers blown, but we must get Effie and Annie out...and of course, Johanna and Portia as well," he added as an afterthought.

"How the hell are they going to accomplish something like that?" Peeta took a few steps back until he felt the stability of a wall behind him.

"It's a brilliant plan," Plutarch spoke. "It involves gas, and the tunnels. Justus has knowledge of their layout, and has spent much time drawing out diagrams of them from the moment Effie informed us that she had access to them. Of course we're currently running on the assumption that they've stayed the same. I cannot imagine President Snow *would* change the corridors considering he thought Justus was dead for so long, and the rebellion quelled within the Capitol." Plutarch seemed to be having a conversation with himself. "No, of course he wouldn't have altered them. That wouldn't make any sense whatsoever."

"So," Katniss stood and gripped the edge of the bed's railing. "When will we know?"

"The next twelve to eighteen hours are critical," Plutarch said. "Would you like me to have the doctors sedate any of you until it's over?" Plutarch looked around the group.

"I'd love to be, but I think we all know that's impossible," Katniss lifted her eyes to Peeta's sunken shoulders. "You should, Peeta. You don't need to go through anymore hell than you already have," she suggested. Regardless of the emotional turmoil she was currently going through, she still cared about him and always would.

He shook his head. "I don't want another drug as long as I live." He turned to Plutarch a thought suddenly plaguing him, "Where's Haymitch? Why isn't he telling us this?"

Plutarch shook his head in disbelief, "The mission was volunteer only. Boggs ignored Haymitch's request to go until he brought up an excellent point. Effie Trinket wouldn't trust anyone but him, and she's of the utmost importance to the rebellion."

"Volunteer?" Katniss asked nervously. "Justus, Haymitch, and Boggs have gone, but who else?"

"There were seven in all I believe," everyone in the room could sense that Plutarch was avoiding something. "A former Tribute Train attendant named, Kimber, and...Lavinia."

"Lavinia?" Katniss faced Regina. "Oh my God, does she even have enough training for something like that?"

"She's been in training for weeks now," Plutarch answered. "She's quite an adept soldier. Amazing really. Who knew she had so much talent?"

'Spend your life as an Avox,' Katniss thought to herself, 'You'd have the drive to be a soldier in the rebel's army too.' "Who else, Plutarch?" Katniss' question demanded an answer.

Plutarch had an almost sheepish look cross his face as he said, "I think you know who."

It was Peeta who said what Katniss was thinking, "Gale." Just thinking about Gale going on the mission left Peeta feeling torn. On the verge of anger, thinking maybe the guy had gone to get in good with Katniss, and gratefulness for risking his life for people he probably didn't give a damn about.

Regina walked up to Katniss, placed an arm around her back. "Justus will get them out of there. I just know it."

The physician's stomach seemed to get larger every time Katniss looked at it. She understood what the doctor was going through. What it felt like to wonder if the child you were carrying would ever have the

opportunity to meet its father. "Why don't you sit, Regina?" Katniss motioned towards the hospital bed.

"No," Regina shook her head. "I need to do something to occup...keep my..." The doctor who had never faltered teared up. "If you'll excuse me, I need to do some work with Prim. She's come up with an idea to help Peeta, and I believe it may work."

"What..."

"Don't ask yet, Katniss," Regina stopped her. "We're still working on it, and if it fails...I don't want to get your hopes up. In the meantime..." Regina faced the people in the room, her voice cracked before leaving. "I'll be thinking of all of your loved ones today."

Three former tributes stood unmoving, staring...wondering...imagining the worst...until Finnick broke the silence. "Don't you see? This is good news. We'll know by tomorrow. No more imagining the worst. They'll either be here with us or they'll be dead," there was an optimistic edge to his voice that neither Katniss nor Peeta could deny. Both options were better than the not knowing.

Peeta stood tall, hands to his sides. "I want to go."

"I'm sorry, Peeta," Plutarch said, "It's too late. They've left already."

"Then I'll meet up with them," he took a step towards the former Head Gamemaker. "I've been there. I know how the jail cells are laid out."

"You're too fragile, Peeta." Plutarch's words were a cover.

"No," Peeta shook his head then dropped it. "You mean I'm too dangerous."

Plutarch placed his hand on Peeta's shoulder. "The truth is, you're too important. There was talk about sending you back to the Capitol, especially with your current feelings towards President Snow, but this isn't the time. Right now, we need you here. The rebellion needs its Jabberjay."

The helpless feeling Katniss had been plagued with since arriving in Thirteen was evident in Peeta's features. "Well you can't expect us to just sit idly by and do nothing at all!" She barked. "We've got to do something!"

Plutarch pondered for a moment, lifted a finger in the air then said, "I have a brilliant idea. Let's get you three down to Beetee. Katniss...Peeta, you'll need to put your uniforms on, and I'll speak with Beetee about breaking through the Capitol's networking system."

"Yes!" Finnick practically jumped out of his skin. "A distraction of sorts. That's a great idea. What do you say, Katniss? Shall we go to Special Weaponry and show Peeta around?" He said eagerly.

"Yeah...sure." Katniss answered and walked with the group towards the elevator. She could've killed Finnick when he pulled Plutarch out of it at the last minute, leaving her and Peeta in there alone, claiming he needed to speak with the former Head Gamemaker in private.

"I don't know what floor it's on," Peeta stared straight ahead as Katniss pushed the button without saying a word, momentarily worried about being alone with her. "So...Beetee has a new weapon for me," he tried to make conversation in the hopes that he wouldn't have another violent outburst.

"I guess so," Katniss leaned against the wall with her hands behind her back.

Peeta thought of the portrait only he and his father had seen before covering it with a sheet and having his dad hide it in his new quarters. "And I'm painting again. It was..." Katniss flashed him a look that clearly stated she didn't want to hear about it, "ni...nice," he stumbled over his words knowing he sounded like a complete fool.

"Yup," Katniss wasn't in the mood to talk about his paintings, or anything at all for that matter. The only thing she wanted to hear was Peeta admitting that he didn't love her and wanted to end their marriage, or worse, that he was going to stay with her for the sake of the baby.

His plan that day was to apologize for the things he had said...the way he had been acting towards her. Peeta had given their situation careful consideration, coming to the conclusion that he not only wanted to stay with her during the remainder of the pregnancy, but for as long as she'd have him, and then he got up to use the restroom that morning. He didn't even make it five feet away from his bed before he felt that horrifying surge of fury go through his body. Thankfully he stumbled into the hallway where Dr. Valero had two guards posted. They quickly cuffed his hands and feet when he staggered through the door shaking uncontrollably, and took him to another room where Prim suggested they give him a tiny dose of morphling. If a large dose would put him to sleep, then maybe a small dose would calm him down. When Plutarch called for him, though Peeta admittedly was feeling better, he was petrified to be in the same room with Katniss. He was just about to tell Regina to get ready to monitor the baby's vital signs because he was breaking things off with Katniss, but life turned on a dime, as it usually did, and now he was trapped in an elevator with her, getting ready to help in... "Trapped in an elevator," Peeta whispered to himself. "We were trapped in an elevator together in Twelve. Real, or not real?"

"Real," Katniss slowly turned her head towards him. "Do you remember that?"

"You were scared."

"Yeah," Katniss nervously licked her lips, wishing the elevator they were currently on would hurry up and reach its destination.

"That's about all I can muster up." Peeta let his eyes drift from side to side trying to think of something else to say to her, anything to get break up the tension between them. "Do you think Haymitch will be well enough to make it through this mission?"

"He's got a powerful source of motivation. I'm sure he'll be fine." It was eating Katniss up alive talking to him with a cool tone in her voice, but she had to keep her distance, and she knew if she showed him one sign of affection she'd cave into her feelings, and allow him to hurt her. The best thing she could do was build up her defenses, and not let him in. She had done it once before when they had first gotten home from the Games, she could do it again. 'Yeah, and look how well that worked out for you,' she ran a hand over her pregnant stomach. "Oh shut up," she mumbled to herself.

"Did you say something?" Peeta asked.

"No." That dreaded spot between her eyes started to throb uncontrollably, but Katniss refused to rub at the bridge of her nose. As far as she was concerned, it would be showing a sign of weakness, and that was a handicap she refused to succumb to. The wall of defense she decided to build was going up brick by brick as she thought about her current situation. People were putting their lives at risk to go on the mission she had been waiting for since arriving in Thirteen, and Peeta was acting like nothing had happened between the two of them. She had been hurt, more than wounded, by his

recent behavior, pissed as hell after hearing what he had said to Regina last night, and now she had to put on a show for the cameras. 'Guess the odds will never be in my favor,' she thought to herself as she slouched against the wall.

"And what if Haymitch isn't okay?" He turned to face Katniss, a burst of uncontrollable anger shot through him. "He could barely hit the side of a barn with that damn knife he slept with when we first started training for the Quell, and you think he can just waltz into the Capitol and get Effie out? We'll be lucky if he makes it back alive. Or don't you care?"

"Of course I care about Haymitch!" Katniss yelled at him. "He's my family! I'm worried sick about him. Who do you think has been here with him...helping him through all of this while you and Effie were at the Capitol?" She pierced him with a vicious stare, "Maybe you're the one that doesn't care?"

He could feel a tingling coursing through him, a rage building up, and it petrified him to no end. No matter how hard he tried to tell himself not to say anything damning, he simply couldn't stop the words from coming out. "Oh, please. There's only one person on that mission I don't care about and you know who that is, so why don't we drop your, 'Oh I'm so worried about Haymitch,' act," he mimicked her voice, "and face the truth. It's Gale you're worried about, not Haymitch." He knew that would hurt, he could see it in her face, and in the back of his mind he berated himself for saying it. "Let's just get through this filming and go our separate ways for the rest of the day, okay?" The second he said it, he felt a tiny piece of himself crumble inside.

"Fine!" She snapped at him with her arms crossed and her foot tapping at the floor. "This way," she barked at him the second the doors opened.

"After you," he barked back.

Katniss led him through the different hallways without saying a word and let her anger fester within. She was tired of their fighting, and missed the man she had married. Even the man who she found in the tunnel was better than this one, but she didn't know how to bring him back, and at this point, she wondered why she should even bother. He obviously hated her. "We need to go through security first." Their fingerprints were taken, a retina scan was done, then Katniss pointed him towards the DNA scanner. "Just walk through it."

Peeta stepped under the arch of the device, waited and asked, "Does it always take this long?" A hint of impatience in his tone.

"It's your first time under. It has to register you in the syst..."

A computer generated voice interrupted Katniss, "Peeta Mellark." The green light flashed and he stepped to the other side.

Prior to Katniss walking through she spoke to the newest guard that was standing watch. "You may want to get Beetee. Whenever I walk through this thing it says 'unknown DNA' and he's got to override the system."

For a brief second Peeta's eyes flashed to Katniss wondering why the scanner responded that way. "Is there a reason it doesn't detect your DNA?" He asked when the guard left.

Katniss checked to make sure they were alone then said, "It detects mine, but it also detects the one it can't identify," she quickly glanced downward.

It took Peeta a second before realizing who's DNA the computer was detecting. "Oh."

"For Christ sake, what's taking him so long?" The guard had been gone for all of three minutes before Katniss felt her patience being stretched to the limit. "Screw this."

Her slipper covered feet took their designated spot under the arch. The computer generated voice spoke, "Katniss Mellark." She expected the red light and the alarm to instantly sound, instead her eyes flashed to Peeta's when the computer announced, "Female fetus...Mellark."

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"Cresta! Trinket!" Steven walked to their cells, "President Snow wishes to see you." He waved a hand in front of the lock on Annie's cell door, cuffed her, then did the same with Effie. "Move!" He held a gun to their backs, then spoke to the guard on the way out. "Mason's dead. Drowned during torture, but Snow wants you to look through her cell to make sure everything's clear. These rebels are resourceful. She could have hidden something in it."

"Yes, sir," the Peacekeeper walked towards Johanna's cell while Steven placed the key to the cuffs in Effie's palm, turned around, pulled a device out from his pocket, snapped it onto the end of his gun and shot the guard in the back within the span of seconds. "We don't have much time," he pulled the silencer off of the gun and handed it to Effie. "Remember how to use this?"

"Yes," she nodded frantically, wondering what on earth was happening.

"Unlock Annie, and stand by the commode in the cell with the broken lock."

"Mr. Tanner what about Portia?" The rest of the prisoners had been missing for over a day, and Effie could only assume they had been killed.

He turned around her with fury on his face, "You, Effie. You and I both know you won't leave without Annie, so that's it!" He quietly yelled at her. "Now go or I'll put a bullet through her brain and drag you out of here."

Effie could tell from the look on his face the man wasn't kidding. She and Annie stood next to the steel toilet in the first jail cell that no one was ever locked up in and watched as Mr. Tanner attempted to lift the guard up and throw him over his shoulder. "Ugh," he grunted, still sore from his recent surgery.

"Annie, you stay here," Effie ran out of the cell and took the dead guard's arm while Mr. Tanner took the other and they dragged. "Where are we going to put him?" She asked.

"In the tunnel." Mr. Tanner turned to Annie, "Flush that thing in rapid succession six times. Hurry."

Annie's eyes were wide with shock as she followed orders and the wall disappeared. "Oh my goodness," she said in her timid voice.

"Let's go," Steven and Effie dragged the guard into the tunnel, leaving him right next to the doorway once the wall was back in place. "I can't

get to Portia, Miss. Trinket. I'd like to help you, but I just can't get to her. You three are all I'm able to..."

"Three?" Effie asked.

"Johanna's not dead, she's waiting for us, now get the guard's weapons and let's go," Mr. Tanner gently ordered her. "Stand back," he pushed on a wall in seven different spots, and revealed an exceptionally battered Johanna Mason sitting with her back against a wall.

"About damn time you showed up," She tried to stand, but fell down to her knees. "Son of a bitch," she said under her breath, and lifted concerned eyes to Steven. "Hagar, get them out. I'm not going to make it."

"You think I went through all of this to leave you here, Johanna?" He placed an arm under her so she could lean on him. "Those rebels are on their way here," he quickly brought Effie and Annie up to speed. "Now...we're *all* getting out of here," he said to Johanna.

Effie's spirits lifted, "You mean you'll join the rebellion?"

"No," he led them down the tunnel towards the Tribute Center, "but I'm not sticking around here either. I overheard a meeting while standing guard yesterday about my district needing help. I'm not sure how I'll get there, but...I'd like to go home and do my part."

Johanna rolled her eyes as she held onto his shoulders for leverage. "So you want to save us and then fight against us? Might as well leave me here, Hagar. I don't want to have to kill you," she said dryly.

After ten minutes of traveling a demure voice spoke from behind Effie, "Where are we going?" Annie gripped the back of Effie's tattered clothing she was still wearing since the interview days earlier.

"Roof of the Tribute Center," Steven replied and noticed each of Johanna's steps getting more and more sluggish. "Come on, Mason. You're a victor. You can do this."

Steven's words were what she was telling herself at that very moment, but her body wasn't listening. "Give me a break, will ya Steven. I just got brought back from the dead."

"It's Hagar," there was a hint of teasing in his voice. "Hagar the horrible."

"Knew you liked that name." Her legs gave out almost causing her to fall face first, but Steven's arms were there to catch her.

"Come on, Johanna," he sounded like he was pleading with her. "Don't give up on me now."

"Shh," Johanna stopped moving. "They're talking."

The group gathered around the tiny radio and listened carefully. "Freedom to Silence, we've nested."

"Freedom, birds have flown the coop, a search is in progress."

Steven could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "They know you're gone. Johanna, you're going to have to stand on yo..." The blast of a gun shot fired through the tunnel, and Johanna's body slumped to the ground. With one hand Steven pushed Annie down, and with the other he let out three shots in quick succession taking out the three guards heading his way.

Effie took her stance with her back to him, prepared to fire at the loud footsteps heading towards them from behind. "I'm on wide shot," she flipped a button on her weapon, and shot at the white uniformed guards racing towards them, wounding one and killing two.

"You'll only have enough power for a few shots if you keep it set on wide," Steven fired one more shot and took out the injured guard. "Come on!" He reached down and picked up Johanna who had blood dripping from the side of her head.

"Take the radio, Annie and run like the wind," Effie yelled as they headed towards freedom. "Is she dead?" She asked of Johanna.

"Not yet," Johanna croaked out. "Just a flesh wound."

Effie took up the rear, Annie the middle and Steven the front cradling Johanna's limp body like an infant. His gun hand sticking out from beneath her knees, taking aim at anything headed their way. "It's not much further," he spoke words of encouragement to the women. Within seconds more Peacekeepers were behind them, too far away to hit anything with their guns, but the well trained guards were easily catching up with the group.

"Go Annie!" Effie screamed out for the girl to follow Steven and took a proud rebel stance thinking if she was going to go down, she would do so with a fight. "They're falling!" She turned towards Steven and yelled out, "They're collapsing." A puff of white smoke was billowing towards them and Effie instantly thought of the fog the Gamemakers had used against the tributes in the arena, "My God!"

Steven turned on his heels to see what Effie was screaming about. "We're almo..." The first blast of a gunshot struck him in the leg, the second, between his shoulder blades causing him to fall to his knees.

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Their eyes met, their disagreements melted away. Nothing seemed to matter anymore except for one thing. They were having a baby girl.

"Oh, Katniss," Beetee's voice broke Katniss and Peeta from their reverie. "I see the scanner has finally been able to identify you without any problems." He led them through the glass doors towards the next security area. "Fortunately we won't need to waste time with alarms and what not," Beetee said when they arrived at the next security area.

Katniss' eyes flashed to Peeta's. "Hey, Beetee," Peeta walked up to the man and put an arm around his shoulder. "Would you mind giving me and Katniss a second. We sort of had a little spat earlier and...well...you know how it is," Peeta gave the man a little wink.

"Oh. Oh, yes. Certainly. Come with me," he spoke to the soldier that was posted there, hurrying through the security area. "I shall have your uniforms ready and waiting for you," Beetee said before leaving them alone to work through their spat.

"If I were you, I'd hurry up," Peeta practically pushed Katniss through the archway. "Finnick, Plutarch and his film crew are right behind us."

Katniss didn't even bother to look. She simply rushed through the process of identification once again, as if her fingerprints and DNA

had changed in the past few seconds, and tried not to show too much excitement when the computer's voice repeated the news of their baby's gender. There would be time to allow the news to register later.

"Katniss," Peeta stopped her with his voice before she entered the room where Beetee waited for them.

"Not now, Peeta," the cool tone she had been giving him was gone.

"I just wanted to say..." Plutarch's posse entered the room talking so loudly Peeta could barely hear himself think. "I didn't mean it when I blamed you for the bombing," he mouthed to her as he stepped through the DNA scanner.

"I didn't mean to snap at you this morning," she mouthed back stepping away from the doorway, moving closer to Peeta.

"I'm afraid, Katniss. I could lose it, explode at any minute...hurt you...hurt the baby," he silently admitted to her as he took one more step. "I was going to end things with you because of it."

When she heard the reason behind the things he had said she blew out a sigh of relief, "I thought you hated me," she closed the gap between them, unaware that Plutarch had ordered the cameramen to film their silent conversation.

"I don't hate you, Katniss," he wanted desperately to hold his hand out to her, but denied himself the pleasure. "Do you hate me?"

"No. I was trying to this morning, but that didn't work out too well."

"Seems like no matter how much we try to stay apart, something keeps pushing us back together again huh?"

"Yeah," she whispered, her eyes locked on his now instead of his lips.

They stayed staring at each other that way for a few seconds before Peeta pulled his focus, reminding himself that he had to keep some sort of distance from her. There were other issues much more pressing to deal with. "What do you say we do our part in bringing our daughter's grandparent's home?"

"Sounds good to me," she was about to slip her fingers through his until she noticed the group of people behind her, and the camera's red light glaring at her. "Great," Katniss rolled her eyes at them and headed through the door. "Do you know if we were actually talking back there?" She whispered to Peeta over her shoulder. The sound of his laughter was almost foreign to their ears. "What's so funny?"

"How many people actually have to ask a question like that, Katniss?"

"None that I know of," she shirked a shoulder.

As they entered the room with Beetee he asked, "Did you two work everything out?"

"Did we?" Peeta asked with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Her face was stone, but even the toughest of rocks could crack under pressure. "For now." Things were better, but they'd still have to do some serious talking. "So...um...is it okay if I'm worried about Gale too?" It was silly asking Peeta for permission, completely unlike her. However, considering his condition...his feelings towards Gale, and the fact that she knew she'd never be able to hide her concern for her best friend, Katniss felt an obligation to forewarn Peeta in an attempt to prevent another fight.

"Guess I'm going to have to learn to deal with that," he could feel a part of him bristling at the thought then realized he had a friend he was terrified for. "Is it okay if I'm worried sick about Johanna?"

"Johanna?" Katniss was kind of surprised at this. "I guess so. I mean...we were allies in the arena."

Peeta got a far off look in his eyes remembering all that the woman had done for him while he was held captive. "Johanna was a lot more to me than just an ally, Katniss."

For the first time since Peeta had been back, Katniss could relate to his feelings of jealousy towards Gale. She was sure there was nothing going on between Peeta and Johanna, but that still didn't take away from the fact that Johanna had shared weeks with Peeta that Katniss didn't. She had been there for Peeta during the worst moments of his life, while Katniss spent her time with her belly full of food, hunting...laughing with Gale... Yes, she completely understood why President Snow would use jealousy as a weapon. It was a powerful source of vengeance.

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"No!" Effie screamed out as she shot blindly at the Peacekeeper running towards them, missing him completely.

"EFFIE STOP!" Haymitch ran behind Gale who was dressed as a Capitol guard.

"Haymitch!" Her first instinct was to run into his arms. Effie was torn for all of a second before dropping to her knees in front of Mr. Tanner.

"Don't you worry Mr. Tanner, you'll be fine. Help is here now." She looked up to Haymitch and Gale, "We have to get them out of here."

Gale reached his arms out and lifted Johanna in them. "I'm not bringing a Peacekeeper back with us! Let's go!"

"Come on, Effie," Haymitch spoke into his wristband, "We've got them," then turned to Effie, "We've got to go sweetheart before that gas knocks us out."

"I will not leave him!" Effie rolled Steven onto his side and looked absently around for something to press against his wounds, finding nothing to staunch the blood flow, she ripped her own blouse off, holding it against the bullet wounds. "Haymitch, I cannot leave him behind. He's risked his life to help us escape. He's the reason I know about these tunnels. Please?" She looked up to him with tears in her eyes.

"Son of a bitch, Trinkie!" Haymitch reached down and lifted the man up, but he was built like a two ton brick house. "Sweet mother," he grunted as Effie took Steven's other arm and they dragged him down the hall. "Gale! We need your mask," he called up ahead to the man. A gas mask was thrown their way, as Gale ran with Johanna in his arms, and Annie hanging onto his belt. "Pick that thing up and put it on," Haymitch ordered Effie as they reached the mask, quickly looking up at the air duct the sleeping gas was about to come out of. "Hurry up or we're all dead!" Effie reached down and grabbed it, pulled it over her head, then took hold of Steven's arm again. Once she had it in place, Haymitch pulled his on, and said, "Jesuuus, Trinkie! You always have to be the mother lovin' hero!"

"Oh, shut up, Haymitch and move!" She ran as quickly as her petite frame could take her.

"What the hell are you doing in here anyway? We were on our way in to rescue you." Frustration dripped from Haymitch's voice, "You couldn't have waited a few minutes for me to break you out?"

"For criminy's sake, Haymitch...must you always complain?" Effie pulled her mask off and put it over Steven's face while holding her breath.

"Put that damn thing back on!" Effie glared at him. "Geez. Only you would risk your freaking life for a Peacekeeper."

She pulled the mask off of Steven and placed it on herself. "I'm afraid you have that backwards. This young man has done nothing but help us...helped me to get Peeta to safety, so I suggest you...stifle it." Effie felt a surge of adrenaline run through her when Haymitch pulled his mask off and placed it over Mr. Tanner's face.

"You...two...always this...friendly?" Steven said through gritted teeth.

"She's a pain in my ass!" Haymitch called out.

"And you're a moronic buffoon!" She yelled back.

Haymitch stole a quick glance at her and gave her a grin, "God, I've missed ya Trinkie."

"Me too darling." Effie smiled lovingly at him. "Now let's get Mr. Tanner to safety."

Gale pushed Annie towards Justus, who was waiting with another soldier next to the door that led to the Tribute Center, calling out, "Take her," shoving Johanna into the arms of Kimber. "Peacekeepers!" He pulled the trigger on his gun, missing the guards that were headed their way and opted for his bow and arrows once his hands were free.

He reached behind him, pulled out a fire arrow and shot it into the chest of the lead Peacekeeper causing the man to go up in flames, and the ones behind him to take cover. "Come on!" He screamed towards Haymitch and Effie then ducked through the doorway.

"I'm not...going to make...make it," Steven could feel his whole body draining of blood.

"Yes you will, Mr. Tanner, and I don't want to hear another word about it," Effie said curtly.

"Effie..." Haymitch gave her a shake of his head as though telling her carrying the guard was useless.

"I will not leave this Capitol without you Mr. Tanner!" She spoke to Haymitch, "So I suggest you...haul ass!"

Steven let out a cough, "Yes...ma'am." He fought to keep his eyes open knowing once he closed them he'd be dead. As far as he was concerned, he still had a job to do; get Effie Trinket out alive. "Take the mask off. I can't breathe through it." Steven quickly surveyed the area, taking their options into consideration. "There's no way I'll make it up the stairs to the roof." Steven gestured with his chin towards the doorway, "To the right...behind the wall...of mir...mirrors there's an...express elevator. Goes...straight to th...the roof." He tried to take a breath, but they were getting harder and harder to come by. "There's...a key...my card..." he lost his train of thought for a moment then said, "Mis...Miss. Trinket, my card...member?"

"This way," Gale was holding another door open for them.

"No," Haymitch motioned for the group to join him by the mirrors. "How do we access it?" He asked Steven.

"My...my card," he knew what he wanted to tell them, but was having a very difficult time.

"At his waist," Johanna reached for it and ripped it from his belt buckle remembering that's where he had put it when he stopped the elevator so they could watch the propos. "Where do I put it?"

"Tree," Steven panted out. "The lemon..."

"Got it," Johanna reached for Gale's arm. "Hold onto me before I pass out," her trained eye scanned the lemon trees that lined up in front of the mirrors and bright lights as decor. "There," she pointed to the middle of a thin trunk with an oddly shaped branch sticking out of it. "What do I do?" She asked Steven.

"Twist it to the left...pull on the...fifth..."

"Fifth lemon, got it," Johanna said feeling a shot of adrenaline shoot through her when the mirrors faded away and a steel elevator door appeared. "Remind me to kiss you when we get out of here Hagar."

Shots rang out from behind them. "HURRY!" Gale turned and shot another fire arrow through the door setting the control panel across from them on fire, then slammed their door closed. "Can't they stop this thing and get on?" Gale worried.

"Straight shot...to the roof." The pain was growing out of control as Mr. Tanner said, "Snow's escape plan...just in...case he...had to get out," his head dropped downward and he let out a loud groan.

Johanna pushed his card into the control panel. "Now what?" The elevator began moving of its own accord. "No dying on me Hagar," she warned him. "If I'm getting out of here, so are you. Got me?"

"Yeah," he swallowed the bile that was rising to his throat. "They'll be on the roof waiting...weapons ready."

Effie reached down and pulled Mr. Tanner's gun from his boot, pulled a knife from the back of his belt and handed it to Johanna, then gave Annie the baton. With guns in both hands, ready to fire, Effie stepped towards the front of the elevator. "Stay to the sides in case they shoot first," she stood next to Haymitch with her back plastered against the wall. The doors opened to reveal an all-out battle between the remaining soldiers and over a dozen Peacekeepers. "Get them to safety," Effie called out as she darted from the elevator with her guns blazing.

"Come on Effie," Haymitch yanked at one of her arms tugging her towards the hovercraft's staircase.

Annie was the first to enter the hovercraft, followed closely by Johanna, Kimber, Steven, Justus, and Gale. Haymitch had to pick Effie up, throw her over his shoulder and carry her struggling body inside when they spotted a Capitol official running towards them, dragging Portia behind, yelling out to the rescue team to wait for them. The craft lifted from the roof, leaving behind the remains of a once beautiful garden where Katniss and Peeta had dreamed of a world without Games, flattened wind chimes that no longer provided melodic tones, a Capitol official that had taken a bullet to his brain and Portia being dragged back into the Tribute Center by Peacekeepers.

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It was Cressida's idea to film outside in the midst of the woods, showing the destruction of the bombs Snow had dropped on Thirteen. Katniss had no clue what she was going to talk about, neither did Peeta. He could talk about the things Snow did to him at the Capitol, but the truth was he didn't know if bringing it up would cause him to have what Beetee referred to as a flashback. He could talk about Katniss, but that was a somewhat sticky situation as well. The nation needed to think the Mockingjay and the Jabberjay were still united. That their love was unbroken, and no one, especially President Snow, could ever break them apart. Though they had made it past their most recent disagreement, Peeta knew there was a long road ahead of them before they'd be where the country thought they were.

Makeup was slapped on Katniss fairly quickly, no one mentioned the conversation, the few words that *may* have been overheard, between her and Peeta in security, and frankly, Katniss no longer cared. She and Peeta had decided it was time to put an end to the charade the night he came to Thirteen, and Katniss was determined to stick to that decision. She was sure that was one of the reasons she and the baby weren't doing so well, and why she was wearing the bracelet that monitored the baby's vitals once again. Plutarch poked his head into the tiny remake room to tell her it was time to start filming, and Katniss followed him outdoors wearing her black mockingjay uniform. The first thing she noticed was the temperature. There was a chill in the air that hadn't been there before. How much time had gone by since the war started, and the districts stood up to Snow. The air she inhaled through her nose was fragrant with the end of summer and the beginning of fall. 'Autumn is Peeta's favorite time of year,' she thought to herself. She wondered if it would do him good to spend time watching the colors of the leaves change, to feel them crunch beneath

his feet...to sketch them. "Where's Peeta?" She asked Plutarch, and found out he was waiting on set for her to join him.

"Katniss," Cressida began speaking, "We thought this was a perfect spot." Two chairs were set up in front of a giant oak tree.

"How did you find this tree?" She ran her hand over the bark curious as to how she missed it during her days spent hunting in the woods. "I had no clue..." her sentence trailed off as her eyes met Peeta's.

"It was one of the few that survived in this area," Cressida answered.

"It's oak, isn't it?" Peeta asked her.

"Yeah," she said quietly before taking her spot wondering if he remembered any of the moments they shared together in Twelve under one that looked just like it.

"Peeta if you wouldn't mind sitting next to her in that seat there," Cressida's directions started, but Katniss was still struggling to think of what to say during her interview.

The purpose of the day was to talk about something so riveting that no one from the Capitol would be able to keep their eyes off of their television screens. Especially Snow. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Peeta being fitted with his mic, thought about the stench of roses that had filled the woods only..., 'Geez,' she thought to herself, 'it's been...' she began counting back in her head and realized that Peeta had been back for almost a week. 'A week. What have Effie and the others gone through as punishment while you were here with me?' She tilted her head to the side and watched as his lips moved in conversation with Cressida and Plutarch. 'I know what I've gone through...the torture we've suffered regardless of whether or not you're here, but what about them?' "Cressida?" Katniss interrupted their

conversation leaving Peeta and Plutarch to talk amongst themselves, "May I speak with you in private for a moment?" It was a simple enough request, but you would've thought that Katniss asked Cressida to give up a lung or something from the way the film maker responded. "I want you to ask me about Peeta and the baby today." Katniss took her seat, ignoring the sounds of excitement coming from the director. There was only one way to help the people she loved today, only one way to save the woman who had saved Peeta, and that was to show the world the person she had given Peeta a glimpse of the day she met him. The girl she allowed herself to be underneath an oak tree.

"Katniss...Peeta," the sound of Cressida's voice had them both turning towards the camera. "Thank you for coming here today...for speaking with us." They both nodded. "Peeta, this is your first formal interview since being back with Katniss. How do you feel about that?"

"A little nervous actually." His presence, which was normally so commanding during televised interviews, was a bit fidgety. "My last few interviews didn't turn out so well," he let out a burst of nervous laughter, and Katniss automatically reached for his hand that was gripping the arm of the chair and squeezed.

"No one will hurt you here. I won't let them," she realized something. That if she was going to do this, then she couldn't talk to a camera, she had to talk to Peeta. "Can you look at me for a second?" She never bothered to wait for Cressida's questions. Peeta faced her with a hint of fear in his eyes. "When we agreed to do this, I don't think anyone thought about the interviews Snow forced you to do with Caesar...how this would make you feel, so if you want to leave, we'll get up and go. No questions asked."

He thought about Effie...Johanna...Portia, flashed a look towards Finnick who was biting at his thumb nail, and said, "No, Katniss. I can do this as long as..." he dropped his head downward, then raised his eyes up, "...I was going to say something after that, but I don't remember what."

"You were going to say that you could do it as long as we do it together...that we can do anything together," Katniss tucked a few strands of perfectly coiffed hair behind his ear. "See, we always say that when we get scared, or we're worried about facing something alone, but then we remember...we never have to be alone again because we swore we'd always face things together." She saw him visibly gulp, then gave him a timid grin. "I'm going to tell you a story. It's about a boy and a girl, and a stalled elevator." Katniss remembered the day well, she remembered every one of those days, but this one in particular was the day she thought of as the day her life began. "The first time I met you was in an elevator shaft in District Twelve. You see, each year..." Katniss went on to describe what had happened the day she officially met Peeta Mellark to the world, as Peeta remembered something she never knew.

The elevator in the mine shaft was frozen in place. The coalmine they were required by the school to tour each year, was below them, the exit above them. Katniss had been petrified of their situation, and Peeta couldn't blame her. Her father had died in an explosion there, but somehow he was able to calm Katniss down, and they were actually having a conversation. This was his one and only chance. Prim, who he had secretly befriended, had suggested to Peeta that he talk to Katniss while they went to the mines, but Peeta had been afraid to. He had been terrified to talk to her his entire life, but the elevator getting stuck was like a sign. He searched for the courage he had lacked since he was five and decided to lay his heart out on the line.

Telling her about the first time he heard her sing, and how he had watched her walk home from school every single day.

"Peeta," Katniss said with an edge to her voice. "I really don't want to get involved with anyone this way. I'm not interested in having a boyfriend."

"What about a friend?" He had to start somewhere. "Can we be friends?"

It took her a minute before answering, "I suppose."

"Close friends?" Peeta asked with hope in his voice.

"Yes." The blush that crept up on her cheeks made Peeta's heart leap to his throat. "I don't normally hold my friend's hands though," she said without looking at him.

He glanced down at their joined hands and thought he'd be happy to stay that way forever. The simple fact that she had allowed him to do that shocked him. "Then maybe we should classify this as a special friendship?"

"Peeta..." there was a tone of warning in her voice.

"Katniss...I like you. A lot, but if you can honestly sit there and tell me you don't like me then I'll let go of your hand, and when we leave this elevator I'll walk away from you and not give you a second thought." It was a lie. He had been trying to forget his feelings for her for years, yet they just grew stronger and stronger.

His heart raced as gray eyes took each of his features in. It was like she was looking right through him...trying to decide whether or not he was worth the risk. Peeta could almost hear her brain working at high

speed. When she released his hand, he felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. His mother had hurt him his entire life, but the pain he felt now was worse than any his mother had ever caused.

"Peeta." Katniss took his hand again, and a tender smile blossomed on Peeta's face as she said, "I must be crazy."

His thumb brushed against her hand...moved slowly back and forth over and over again. The hairs on Peeta's arms stood on end when he brushed it across the inside of her wrist. A loud clacking noise interrupted their moment of silence. The elevator began moving upward, precious seconds ticked away as he dug deep and asked, "Will you meet me tomorrow? During lunch? Behind the oak tree?"

"Yes," She whispered to him. They let go of each other's hands just as the doors opened.

He watched her back as she made her way through the crowd that had gathered at the mine's entrance. "Peeta," his dad called out to him. "You okay, son? We've been worried about you."

Katniss pushed past a few miners, ignored the concern several of them showed to her, and walked with determination in each step. "She said yes," Peeta had never felt happiness like he had in that moment.

"Who said yes?" His dad asked, but Peeta didn't hear a word.

'I never thought this would happen,' he walked blindly towards his parent's bakery with his mind going a mile a minute. 'Katniss is going to go on a date with me,' his eyes perked up and searched for her in the distance. 'You're going to show up, right?' He worried briefly then thought, 'Yeah...you will. It's not in you to say you'll do something then go back on it.'

"Peeta, are you okay?" His dad gave him a little shake.

"Hey dad," Peeta turned towards the sound of his father's voice.

"When did you get here?"

"I've been walking with you since we left the mines."

Peeta turned around and noticed how far away they were from their origin. "Sorry pops. I had something else on my mind."

His dad gave him a knowing grin and said, "Someone is more like it."

"I guess," Peeta said shyly. His father knew since the first day of kindergarten how Peeta felt about Katniss. Peeta had walked up to his dad after school and said, "Papa, you were right about that girl. She sang today in class." His five year old mouth spoke without thinking, "I'm gonna be just like her mommy and marry someone that makes the birds fall silent. I'm gonna marry Katniss Everdeen."

Peeta glanced at the much older version of the little girl he had heard sing, and felt a tug at his heartstrings. 'I'm gonna marry Katniss Everdeen,' he thought to himself behind a boyish grin.

"So you see?" Katniss grinned back at Peeta, "You gave me hope back then, and even when we went into the arena together...when I was certain I was going to lose you, somehow you still gave me hope that we could make it through as long as we were together. Whenever I was in your arms I felt...safe, secure, and now I feel..." She lifted her face to the sky, ran a hand over her daughter taking in the scent of the burgeoning autumn air, "...free." Katniss finally faced the cameras, "President Snow once said to me that the districts were fragile. I didn't understand what he meant back then, I was too frightened to really think about it, but now I know what he meant. You see, it wasn't the districts that were fragile, it was the Capitol. The districts...we're

strong. We know how to survive, but the Capitol...they rely on us for everything. For their food, clothing, electronics..." she arched a brow, "...entertainment, but not anymore. Thanks to you President Snow I'm declaring my freedom today. Not just mine, but..." she turned to Peeta who gave her a nod, and turned his palm upward in order to hold her hand in his before Katniss continued, "We're declaring our daughter's freedom today." There was a mixture of sounds coming from the set, most of which were gasps.

Peeta took over where Katniss left off. "Our daughter will not have to face the fear of being reaped, of going into the arena, because let's face it, we all know she would have been in there." Peeta gave the camera a little gleam, and the man that could have easily taken over for Caesar Flickerman magically appeared. "It would have been just a little tooooo tempting to have the child of two victors in the arena, and the Star-Crossed-Lovers?" Peeta feigned shock, "Why what a surprise it would have been to the nation in...what...twelve years, if her name was pulled from the reaping ball?" He sat back and crossed a leg over his knee. "I don't think so, Snow." It was Peeta's turn to let the world in on a little secret. "Now let me tell you about the girl sitting to my left," he stole a peek at her before admitting out loud, "I know her name is Katniss Everdeen, but what I've been told is that her name is Katniss Mellark." Peeta gave his shoulder a little jerk. "I married her, but I don't remember our wedding." He lifted his face to the crowd then pointed. "That guy out there," the camera quickly panned around to show his father then back to Peeta. "Snow told me my dad was dead, yet I come here and there he is...my father...big as day...having to tell me that I was in love with Katniss my whole life long. Describing my wedding day for me and how the Mayor of District Twelve went against everything the Capitol stood for to marry us because even one of his own officials believed in how much she and I loved each other, and that we deserved something that belonged to just us, but..." Peeta faced Katniss, "I don't remember much of it," then faced the camera

again, "because President Snow wanted to use me to kill Katniss." He told them as much as he could about being drugged, but left out how Effie had helped him through it, only saying that he fought the effects on his own. "Yet here I sit, and yes...I can honestly say, Snow momentarily got his way. I don't remember marrying this girl, or creating that life she's carrying," Peeta faced Katniss and took her hands, "but I can tell you this much. There are things I haven't forgotten, but more importantly there are things I've learned about you that have me completely mesmerized." Peeta held her gaze and listed off the little traits that had been causing him to lose sleep. "I love the way you smell...like fresh air...pine..." he lifted his nose in the air, and closed his eyes for a moment then met hers again, "...like a mixture of sunshine and autumn. When you walk you always look like you've got someplace important to go, even if it's just across the room, but you do it without making a sound, which I find absolutely amazing. You have one of the worst tempers I've ever seen on a person, and I was held prisoner at the Capitol, so that's saying something," he grinned at her when she blushed and smiled, "but God, how it drives me crazy...in a good way. I've literally watched people rolling their eyes at you and your attitude, and all I want to do is tell them how stupid they are for not seeing how special that makes you. Then there's that total contradiction that really shocks the hell out of me. That girl that loves me so much she'd do anything for me, even live a lie," his eyes flashed down to her stomach then back up again. "There's something so soft about you, but you don't let just anyone see it, and I find that completely fascinating." Katniss could feel her heart racing with each and every word coming out of his mouth. This was the man she knew, the boy she had fallen in love with. "Then there's your voice..." Peeta thought it was way too soon to tell her how he felt when he heard her sing, but he did say, "Did you know the birds fall silent when you sing?"

Katniss sucked in a little breath and nodded her head. "Yeah," she answered.

"I guess what I'm saying is...Katniss, Snow got his way for about a minute. I don't want to lose what we had." The cameras no longer existed, nor did the people watching them, glued to their televisions across the nation. "I don't even want what we once had, I want something new...better. So, I was wondering..." he jiggled her hand in his, "Katniss," he brushed his thumb back and forth across her wrist like the first time he held her hand, and asked, "will you meet me tomorrow? During lunch?" Then mouthed so no one else would know where, "Behind the oak tree?" He lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin.

She bit the corner of her lip and smiled softly at the same time, "Yes," she paused. "I should probably tell you though...I'm a married woman."

"I'm not worried about your husband." He ducked his head down and whispered loudly, "I think he'll be all for this arrangement."

"Oh, and I'm pregnant...with a little girl."

He faced her with eyes full of hope. "A little girl," he said as if mystified.

"Yeah, a little girl."

"Got any names picked out for her?" Peeta stood up and squeezed her hand.

"Yup. One, but that can always change." Their lives were different now, their past no longer meant as much as their future did, so maybe

choosing a new name for their daughter wouldn't be such a bad thing. "I normally eat a lot," Katniss said with a hint of teasing in her tone.

"I hadn't noticed," Peeta's brow furrowed. "Now that I think of it...maybe I should avoid taking you on a date that includes a meal." He saw the way she arched her brow at him, and Peeta suddenly felt like he and Katniss had accomplished something important. They had become friends. "Not sure why, but...I think I might actually like you, Katniss," the expression on his face clearly read love, his fingers interlocked with hers said the same.

"Yeah...you're all right too," she bumped her shoulder up against his. For the first time since he had arrived in Thirteen, she felt like she had her husband back. "Welcome home, Peeta."

"Good to be back." There was one more thing he needed to say, but this message was directed to someone specific. Peeta faced the camera, his eyes pierced the lens, and said, "President Snow, I gave you some advice when you were torturing me...told you to kill me while you had the chance or I'd kill you." Peeta paused before adding, "You should have listened to me, because...I'm a man of my word."

As they walked off the set, proud of what they accomplished, not only because it was sure to have captivated the viewing audience, but because they had faced up to some serious issues that would help them mend their wounded hearts, they heard Plutarch and Finnick speaking loudly with one another. Peeta dropped Katniss' hand and rushed to Finnick's side, "You don't have to do this." It was like he knew something Katniss didn't.

"If it'll help Annie, then I want to."

Peeta gave Finnick a rap on the shoulder, then walked with his back hunched over towards Katniss. "Sometimes I wish this was one of the

memories Snow stole from me." They listened to Finnick telling tales of being sold. The strange sexual appetites of those at the Capitol, and Katniss gripped Peeta's hand tightly, turned her face into his shoulder, and forced herself to hold back the tears. She and Peeta had always guessed that the designs Cinna had created for her to wear for their 'honeymoon,' were really for other reasons, but hearing Finnick say it out loud, telling the world about the way his body was used by the people in the Capitol, caused Katniss' skin to crawl.

"That would have been me," she whispered into Peeta's chest. She felt him rub his hand up and down her spine, providing her with strength, then she heard Finnick saying something about not taking money for his services, how he wanted something much more valuable. Katniss' spine straightened as she thought, 'secrets,' remembering their very first conversation together the day of the Tribute Parade.

The entire set was captivated by Finnick's words. It was as though Katniss and Peeta had been the aperitif to Finnick's main course, and oh what a tantalizing meal he served up, President Snow on a platter. As the world listened to his rise to power, the reason he kept his position for so long, and the secret to his success...poison, Beetee battled with the Capitol to keep control over the broadcast which hadn't been very difficult since Peeta began speaking about the torture Snow had put him through, however it grew relentless towards the end of Finnick's monologue.

"That's it! Let it go!" Beetee said in a huff as though he had just sprinted a marathon. "If they haven't gotten out by now, then they're all dead."

"Well," Plutarch looked pleased, but not as enthusiastic as he normally did with a good shoot, "I'd say that went swimmingly." He held his hand out, "I'll return your earpiece, Peeta."

Katniss watched as Peeta dug something tiny out of his ear. "Thanks..." he lifted his eyes to Plutarch's, "...for everything. It helped."

As Plutarch walked away Katniss asked Peeta, "What was that earpiece for?"

He was hoping he could return it without her ever finding out. "Plutarch thought it would be best if I talked about you...let Snow know that he didn't break us after all, and...um..." He could tell from the way Katniss' face morphed that she was quickly growing angry with him. "Look, Katniss, we both know I don't remember much about you. All Plutarch did was feed me a couple of things to..."

"Oh my God," she ripped her hand from his. "It was an act!? That was all an act!?"

"Not all of it. None of it, actually," Peeta wasn't sure how to dig himself out of the hole he had dug. "Katniss, all he did was ask me about you. Kind of...prompt me, but that's it."

"So, he asked you to...what? Talk about the way I...smelled!" Her hands were up in the air as she turned on her heels to walk away. "I should've known. Stupid," she grumbled to herself. "Get out of my way," her voice was low, a scowl plastered on her face as Peeta stepped in her path. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Why are you so mad at me? It's not like I was pretending or anything."

With her left eye twitching in anger she asked, "Whose idea was it to ask me out on a date?" The expression that crossed Peeta's face was all the answer she needed to hear. She turned her glare towards Plutarch, then back at Peeta. "Guess the Star-Crossed-Lovers are back on the air. God knows they were great for his ratings the first time around."

"Katniss...I was planning on asking you, but not on camera," Peeta felt deflated. "Please don't walk away."

"I have to." She kept her back to him. "I can't face you right now, Peeta." It was too painful even being in his presence.

"Why not? Let's talk this out."

"Fine," she turned to him, her face was stone. "You want to talk, then I'll talk. I have no desire to be with someone, especially you, because I'm pregnant and you think I can't survive without you."

Peeta's brow furrowed. "What gave you the impression..."

"I heard you!" She yelled, and a group of people turned to see what was happening. "You said you'd stay with me during the pregnancy...don't bother," she spat out at him, "I don't need you. Don't want you. I'll do what I have to for the cameras, but other than that...you and me, let's just call this what it is."

A terrible sense of dread consumed Peeta as he asked, "And what is *it*?"

Katniss searched for and barely found the courage she needed to prevent her heart from taking any more beatings. There was no pain in her voice, she couldn't afford to show it. She held her chin up high and said quietly, "It's over." Just as she was about to turn away she saw

the look on Peeta's face. For a second she thought he was going to explode, until she saw who his gaze was directed at...President Coin.

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Thirteen's hovercraft zipped over Capitol airspace, shooting its weapons at the crafts coming towards them. "We're not going to make it!" Boggs screamed over his shoulder, unaccustomed to co-piloting such a large, up to date hovercraft.

"Effie," Mr. Tanner reached for her. "Get me to..."

"You are not moving, Mr. Tanner!" Effie's voice was trembling as she ordered him to stay put.

"We're...all going to die...if I don't..."

"What do you need, Hagar?" Johanna struggled to her feet and collapsed. "Son of a bitch! Somebody do what the guy wants! He can help us!"

Haymitch carefully eyed him up, "You gonna get us killed?" He pointed a finger at Tanner's nose.

"No, sir. Just...trying to save...Miss. Trink...Trinket."

"Oh, Please Haymitch," Effie complained as he lifted Steven up. "Don't move him."

"Where we going, boy?" Haymitch disregarded her request.

"Control panel...right side." Steven Tanner instructed Haymitch on how to remove it, but it was Effie that made her way over, taking the cover off like she had seen Mr. Tanner do from the outside of a craft before. Like she had done herself.

"Tell me what to do and for criminy's sake, someone give him something for the pain so I can understand what he's saying!" She wanted this over and done with so she could get him medical treatment.

A shot of something was plunged into his arm within seconds, suddenly Steven could speak without concentrating on the pain.

"Remember what we did last time?" Mr. Tanner asked her.

"Yes," Effie answered.

"We're going to do something similar, except this time when you swipe your fingers after reprogramming, you're going to do it in the opposite direction. Immediately after you'll see a red light in the left hand corner. Push it, and hold it down for five seconds. Exactly five seconds or we'll fall out of the sky."

"You'll count?" She asked him as her fingers began to move over the control panel performing the task she had the night before Peeta had escaped.

"I'll count, Miss. Trinket."

"I'm almost...okay..." Effie swirled her fingers, ignoring the blasts that were being shot at them from the Capitol's crafts. "Red light!" She pressed her finger and Mr. Tanner started counting.

"...Two...Three...Four...NOW!"

Effie pulled her finger off of the button and the Capitol craft they were on received a surge of energy that shot them through the air, throwing anyone on two feet to the ground, and those on the ground to roll about the floor. Ten seconds. That's all it took. Ten seconds for all of their lives to change. For one man, a man who didn't believe in anything these people stood for, to save their lives. Steven Tanner lay face down at the base of the hovercraft's wall, unable to move, and ready to die if only he could. "Mi...Miss..." he tried to get her name out, but the strength he had only moments ago was now sapped from him.

"I'm here Mr. Tanner," Effie knelt by his side. "Haymitch...Gale...help me with him, will you please?" There was no medical team on board, but Lavinia did have some training as did Justus. The two signed back and forth to one another, making hand gestures Effie didn't understand the reason why one worked on Johanna and the other Steven, thinking they should both be concentrating on the patient with the worst injury. "Will he be alright?" Effie asked when Justus' rapidly moving fingers ceased to move over Mr. Tanner's wounds. A quick shake of a head was given, which Effie refused to take as an answer. "Well...then you need to do something more! Operate on him! Blood! He needs blood! Give him mine!" She began to shake...tremble as Haymitch wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her away from the Peacekeeper that had risked his life for her.

"Come on, let's give the guy a minute with Johanna," Haymitch said quietly in Effie's ear.

"No I..." Effie started to bellow like a fishwife until she noticed Steven and Johanna's index fingers linked together. "Oh, Haymitch," she threw her arms around his neck and cried for the impending death that could not be prevented.

"Give us a minute..." Steven asked of Justus and Lavinia. He rolled his head towards the girl he had been a fan of since seeing her in the Games he should have been a part of, wondering if this was the reason why he had never been sent into the arena. If he was supposed to be here, if he was supposed to sacrifice his life so Johanna and Effie could live. Whether or not that was the reason Wondra was chosen as the tribute in Johanna's Games, no longer mattered. Steven Tanner now knew his life had a purpose, he had done what he had set out to do, followed through on the oath that he had taken, and protected two women...three, he thought of Annie, that honestly didn't deserve what President Snow was doing to them. "You're going to be alright now."

"No thanks to your stupidity," Johanna was pissed as hell at him for getting shot. "What the hell'd ya have to go and get in the way of that weapon for?"

"Not my fault your guys thought I was the enemy," Steven's attempt at a smile fell flat when Johanna glared towards Gale. "Hey...hey," Johanna turned her focus back to him, "it's not his fault. He was trying to save your lives. I would have done the same, and so would you."

There was no arguing his point. Johanna knew he was right. She would have shot first and asked questions later. "Yeah...well...I don't have to be happy about it."

"It's not like I'm thrilled with the circumstances either Jo." Steven saw her lift the corner of her mouth in a tiny grin. "You smile? I didn't think

you allowed yourself to smile," he threw a version of her words back at her.

"No one's called me Jo since my mother was alive." Now Johanna was absolutely furious. "Damn you, Hagar, what the hell do you have to go and die for!? Can't you just...fight this shit!? Live!"

"I'm trying," he choked as he said it and felt his legs going numb. "It's going to be over soon, Jo."

"We'll be in Thirteen soon. Just hang on a little longer, and you'll be fine."

"Did I ever tell you how I used to dream about meeting you? The great Johanna Mason. You were really something during your Games. I used to think, if only there were girls in District Two like you then maybe I'd be like my parents...work in the quarry...settle down."

"I'm not the settling down type," Johanna arched a brow at him, "but it does sound kinda nice."

The air was getting thicker. Deep breaths were a thing of the past. He had to hurry if he was going to say all he needed to before he took his last one. "It could have been something good...you and me...if we didn't kill each other first."

Death. It was a vicious thing. In some instances it could be merciful, but Johanna had never experienced it in that manner. Every death she had been witness to had been cruel, including the ones she had caused. Death always seemed to bring out the worst in people, and for the first time in Johanna Mason's life, it brought out the best in her. "It coulda been great, Hagar. The fighting would've been an added bonus," she briefly thought of Katniss telling her about her and Peeta making up after their angry bouts. "It coulda been something special."

The finger she had hooked with his curled. She had never kissed this man, never hugged him, never even touched him in an intimate manner other than the two fingers that linked them together, yet Johanna knew losing him was going to make a lasting impression on her life. "The first time I saw you I thought of a story my mother used to tell me, she liked to tell stories, and Hagar the Horrible was one of the characters in her tales. A man who had been hated by everyone in his village because of his position with the King's guard...feared by all...and the second I laid eyes on you, that's who I thought of."

"You didn't seem to be afraid of me when you first met me."

Johanna's eye's drifted towards his. "The thing about Hagar...he had a soft spot for the villagers, and would leave packages of food at their doorsteps when night would fall."

"Sounds like a good guy?"

"He was..." Johanna curled her finger against his, "...you are, Hagar."

Steven gave her one parting look and said, "Take care of yourself, Jo." She gave him a small nod as he let out another cough and called for Effie and Haymitch. "Miss. Trinket, I'm not going to make it all the way to Thirteen with you."

Effie ran a hand over his sweat covered brow. "Oh, Mr. Tanner, please do not die for me." Silent tears were dripping down her cheeks.

Steven Tanner still had a job to do. "Mr. Abernathy, I need something from you."

"Yeah...sure kid." Haymitch was willing to do anything the boy wanted. Effie had told them all what the kid had done for her while Steven was talking with Johanna. "You name it."

"Place your left hand over your heart, and your right one in the air." He waited until Haymitch did what he was told. "Repeat after me," Steven took as deep of a breath as he could and sputtered out a cough, this time bits of blood splashed out onto the corners of his mouth. "I, Haymitch Abernathy," Haymitch repeated his name. "Do solemnly swear..."

"Do solemnly swear..." Haymitch said, and Johanna joined quietly in.

"To sacrifice my life for the safety of Effie Trinket..." Effie sucked in her sob when she listened to Steven then released it when she heard what happened next.

Haymitch and Johanna's voices were joined by the majority of their rescue team who were now kneeling around Steven with their hands over their hearts, except for the pilot, Boggs and Gale. "To sacrifice my life for the safety of Effie Trinket. To ensure her wellbeing, to protect and serve Effie Trinket as she works to bring justice..." The group repeated the oath that Steven Tanner had taken, "...to this great nation for as long as she lives." The words took on new meaning for Steven Tanner that day. He looked around at the people who were supposed to be his sworn enemies, all of them pledging themselves to uphold the promise he could no longer keep. He had spent his entire life searching for something...a sense of pride...a purpose...meaning, and found it in the last seconds amongst those that he was told were his mortal enemies. As Steven took one last look at Johanna, Effie's words came back to him.

"Everything you've ever believed in is suddenly coming into question, isn't it? I'm afraid it doesn't get any easier with the exception of one thing...eventually you realize what's right and what's wrong, and you come to terms with that. You realize that everyone deserves the right to live their life the way they want, and not as servants...as slaves."

"That children should never be put to death as punishment for something that happened over seventy-five years ago."

"Miss. Trinket," he held his hand out to her. "You were right. I know what's right and what's wrong no..." Steven Tanner's eyes glassed over, his last miniscule breath sucked into collapsed lungs. He had started off his life training as a tribute, then lived it as a highly adept Peacekeeper...an enemy to the districts. But today...today Steven Tanner laid down his life not only for the woman he swore to protect, but for a group of people that were fighting against everything he stood for.

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 14: When We Were, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Thirteen: When We Were...

There's just so much to say! First I have to say thank you to all of you that take the time to read, as well as those who review. I swear to you, I have the most loyal readers ever! Not to mention the best reviewers. You guys totally keep me going, so thanks. S and A, through your busy days and nights you still take time out of your life to read these chapters, correct them, comment...advise, and I can never thank you enough. One of my betas will be on vaca till the end of the month, so please be patient if it takes a little longer to get chapters out. Not to mention I finally found a house and have to pack and move by the first of the year...plus there's that whole Christmas thing.

Previously, Effie was rescued from the Capitol. Peeta and Katniss had told the world about their daughter, and Peeta got caught wearing an earpiece in which Plutarch fed him some words of advice. I wonder what Plutarch said and if Katniss should have gotten so mad? And what did Coin think about the announcement of their child? Oh so much drama!

Feel free to follow me on tumblr to see what's up with the story at [jamiesommers23 dot tumblr dot com](http://jamiesommers23.tumblr.com).

Let's go find out what's up in...

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

The film crew began gathering up their equipment as Finnick made his way towards Katniss and Peeta. The man was completely lost in his own world, failing to notice the argument between the pair as well as the president's damning stare. "So...what do you want to do now?"

"Peeta," Beetee pushed his glasses up on his nose with one finger, the other waving in the air as he hurried toward the trio, "if you're feeling up to it, I think this would be a perfect time to start training you with your gauntlets."

Whether he knew it or not, Beetee had come up with a brilliant plan, get Katniss downstairs where she could shoot, and be out of Coin's line of fire. "Gauntlets? You mean there's more than one?" Peeta asked, pretending to be interested in the man's suggestion.

"Oh, yes," Beetee answered, "one for each hand. I'm also working on spare weapons for each of you in case you damage them in the line of duty," he paused, "Perhaps I won't need to worry so much about your bow and arrows any longer Katniss, unless of course you're planning on going out into the field in your condition. Then again, there's always the chance that you'll have no choice." Katniss and Peeta exchanged concerned looks as Beetee continued without hesitation. "How far along are you now, Katniss?"

"Um..." Beetee's lack of reaction came as a surprise to her. "Somewhere between eleven and twelve weeks."

"Well that explains it," Beetee said as though everyone should understand what he was talking about.

"Explains what?" Katniss asked.

"Why the baby's DNA hadn't been recognized sooner. Normally, when a woman in Thirteen is pregnant, like your Dr. Valero, the scanners are able to identify both the mother and child's DNA, but doesn't announce it until the gender has been established. Of course it helps that your DNA is in the system Peeta."

"Why's that?" He asked.

"The system was able to recognize all of the child's DNA markers, not to mention, Katniss was furious when everyone and everything continued to use her maiden name."

"You were?" Peeta slanted his gaze towards Katniss as he let this little bit of information sink in.

"Oh yes," Beetee answered for her. The scowl that crossed Katniss' face clearly said she wanted the man to shut up. "I wouldn't care to imagine how she'd react to your daughter being identified as Everdeen."

"Would it have done that?" Peeta asked trying not to smile as Katniss pierced Beetee with daggers. "Identified it as female...Everdeen?"

"Oh, yes. Especially since none of us in security even knew it existed. If we had known, we would have been able to prevent the scanner from telling you what the gender was, even prevented it from announcing the pregnancy all together if that's what you preferred." Beetee started thinking aloud, "Hmmm...I should have thought of that when the alarms went off with you the first time, but...the doctor's explanation did have merit..." Beetee went on as Peeta noticed the pair of hard eyes continuing to burn a hole through Katniss across the damaged woods.

"Why don't you three head down to Special Weaponry, and I'll meet you there," Peeta suggested.

"Yes. Good. Good," Beetee began walking over broken branches, and loose rubble. "Finnick I've made some adjustments to your trident that you'll want to look over."

"Where are you going?" As if Katniss had to ask.

The conversation he had with Katniss the very first night he was in Thirteen came to mind. "I've got a list of demands that need to be met." Peeta placed his hand on the center of her back and urged her to follow Beetee. "Go on...I'll meet you there. We'll continue our conversation later."

Anger be damned. Right now, banana nut was the priority, and her fight with Peeta could wait. "I'm going with you," she insisted.

"No, you're not." Peeta guided her away from the others and lifted the wrist she wore the fetal monitoring device on. "The last thing we need is to give Coin what she wants. Dr. Valero said you've been having severe problems with your blood pressure and it's causing issues with the baby. Please, Katniss...please," he pleaded. "Let me do this. Let me take care of my family." He waited until he saw her reluctant nod. "Thank you."

"You'll come straight to Special Defense afterward." It was an order, not a request.

"Yes."

"No stopping...anywhere. Meet with her, then..."

"Then I'll come straight to you, and you can finish yelling at me," he grinned.

"Get that cocky smile off of your face." She hated it when he melted her resolve so easily and those smiles of his always got him back in her good graces. "I'm still pissed as hell at you."

"I know." The hand that had been holding her wrist was now running up and down her arm. "And I know you want to pull away from me right now, but she's watching, and I don't want her to think we're

fighting...again, so give me a smile..." her face was stone. "Come on, Katniss, just a little one. Pretend you're being filmed."

"That's your specialty, not mine," her tone cold as ice.

He made a little sound of displeasure then suggested, "Why don't you pretend it's my face you're shooting arrows at while you're in training? That should help." She flashed him a very bright, very fake smile.

"Don't look *too* pleased," he gave her a genuine smile back. "Now go shoot something." He gave her upper arm a little squeeze, thought about giving her a kiss on the cheek, but knew he'd be pushing his luck and walked towards his destination, not stopping until he stood shoulder to shoulder with President Coin.

"Mr. Mellark," Coin's voice was feminine yet very domineering.

"President Coin," Peeta matched her controlled tone. "I think you and I need to have a conversation."

Coin was staring straight ahead, as was Peeta. "Perhaps your wife should be in on this?"

"Perhaps not," Peeta stated in a no nonsense manner. "We can either talk out here, or do this someplace private. The choice is yours, ma'am." Peeta waited until she turned on her heels and led him to the Command Center. He noticed several different soldiers working inside and asked, "Do you really want an audience for this?"

Coin stood with her hands behind her back and asked, "Do you have something to say they shouldn't hear?"

"That all depends on what you want them to be privy to, ma'am." Peeta took a seat, crossed a leg over his knee and presented a picture of total comfort, a complete contradiction to how he was

feeling. "For example, do you want them to hear about the treatment of expectant mothers while they're unconscious, or the hospital room I was placed in that had hidden..."

"Dismissed," Coin barked the order out quite loudly.

Soldiers stopped working instantaneously, exiting without hesitation, and Peeta had to admit he was somewhat impressed. "You're either a very intimidating leader, or your soldiers are very well trained." He leaned back in his chair. "I'm not sure which yet. Either way, I suppose that's a good quality to have in a president. I know Snow had that intimidation trait in spades."

Peeta expected her to respond to his assessment of the armed men and women working under her, but she completely ignored his comment, and got down to business. "I'm assuming there's a reason for this private meeting Mr. Mellark, so let's get to it."

Peeta took a second to enjoy the fact that he was getting Coin's ire up. "No problem. Got a pen and paper around here somewhere?" Peeta asked, and received, but only after Coin's chest swelled up and her nostrils flared.

"I take it your wife has been speaking to you about her list of demands." Coin handed him a small piece of paper and pen.

"This isn't nearly big enough," Peeta walked over to where she got it from and ripped off a sheet of yellowing paper from a printer of some sort that was at least four times as big as the sheet she had handed him. "Now that's more like it." He picked up the pen and tapped at the table with it. "The way I see it, I've been acting as your Jabberjay, whether I wanted to or not, for a while now, and haven't gotten anything in return but threatened with being brought up on charges of treason, having my room wired with hidden cameras, and my wife and

child's lives threatened. So tell me President Coin...if you were me, would you be willing to put on a uniform, plaster on a smile, and play a role for the cameras so freely?"

"I would do what I needed to for the sake of a nation," she said with a threatening gleam in her eyes.

"The sake of a nation?" Peeta tapped the pen against his lip. "Is that what you said when you ordered the doctor to kill my baby? And please don't insult me by denying it. I might have been brainwashed at the Capitol to forget Katniss, but there's one thing I do know, when it comes to our baby, Katniss would never want to have an abortion, and she'd never lie about a miscarriage unless she had to."

For the first time since being accused Coin finally admitted the truth. "I was doing what I thought was best for the..."

"Yes, I know," Peeta interrupted her before she could say, "...for the sake of the nation." He pointed the pen at her. "You use that excuse as much as Snow does. Wasn't the point of this rebellion to prevent children from being murdered...for our nation's sake?" He paused before saying, "So tell me, what makes you so different from him?" He could see her eyes widen with fury. "I'm trying to decide...who's the enemy here? Is it Snow, or is it you?" He flattened his feet on the ground rested his elbows on his knees and said in the most sincere voice he had, "President Coin, I'm asking you to convince me to trust you, because so far you haven't done a damn thing to earn it. Put yourself in my position...in Katniss' position, and ask yourself, would you trust the woman that tried to take our child's life? Isn't that why we're fighting against Snow? To prevent the Games? At least those kids stood a fighting chance, but what chance did our baby have? If it wasn't for a doctor, from the Capitol of all places, our baby would be dead right now. So...convince me. Make me believe that you're the

better president. That you're the leader I want to follow." Peeta held out a hand towards a chair. "Let's talk."

It took a few moments for Coin to take a seat, but when she did she gave Peeta a nod and said, "What do you want to know?"

"For starters, I'd like to know your name." He stuck his hand out and said, "I'm Peeta."

If Peeta didn't know any better he would have sworn he saw a hint of a smile cross Coin's face. "Alma," she shook his hand in return, "but I prefer President Coin or ma'am when in public."

"Mind if I call you Alma now?"

"I suppose that would be..." she appeared to have a problem with it.

"We're just talking here, remember?" Peeta said to her.

"Alma would be fine."

"Great. You can call me Peeta." He asked her about the status of the rebellion, how long they had been hiding in Thirteen, why they hadn't tried to fight back before, and most of all why she hadn't tried to pull him and Katniss out of Twelve before the Quell.

"That was a difficult decision for me, Peeta. Allowing you and Katniss to go back into the arena was not an easy choice, but it was necessary to show the people of the country that we were just as powerful as President Snow."

"You mean *you* were just as powerful as President Snow," Peeta pointed the tip of the pen at her and saw her brow twitch. "Yeah, that's what my mom thought too. Hope you don't mind me saying this, but...that was pretty stupid on your part...and pretty smart," he

conceded. "If Katniss and I hadn't gone in, Snow probably would have pulled in a couple of twelve year old kids to fight in our place, and we're both here now so..." he shrugged a shoulder. "Why us? Why Katniss and I as the faces of the rebellion?"

"You're the Star-Crossed-Lovers..."

"I know what the country thinks." Peeta had no desire to hear a line of bull. "I want to know why *you* wanted us."

"Honestly, I didn't want her at all. I wanted you, but you seem to come as a pair."

"Yeah, we do." He gave her a look of inquisition. "Then why me?"

"Your way with words has the ability to bring about a change, Peeta. It's my belief that your gift could seriously influence this country's way of thinking, including the people of the Capitol. My views on Katniss changed once she was sent to Eight. She proved herself to be quite...worthy of the title Mockingjay, and has been doing a more than satisfactory job since. With the exception of a few emotional outbursts, I've been quite pleased with her performances."

"Her performances?" Peeta asked. "Is that what you think she's doing? Performing?"

"I'm not sure what else to call her televised appearances," Coin had a befuddled expression on her face. "What would you call them?"

Peeta thought of the few propos he saw of Katniss and said, "I'd call them..." he grinned, "...real. I can't imagine for one minute that Katniss was performing when she blew up those hoverplanes in District Eight, and we both know she wasn't acting today."

"Fair enough," Coin conceded.

"One last bit of information, and then I'm done with the inquisition."
Peeta paused then asked, "What's your ultimate goal after winning the war?"

Coin gave him a peculiar look. "I'm sorry?"

"What's the goal here? Do you want to end the Games? Do you want to rule the nation? Do you want to let people marry goats? What's your plan?"

"Ah," Coin gave him a slow nod. "There are history books..." she began explaining to him what Plutarch had explained to Katniss about the structure of their future government.

"So ultimately, you want to run the country, and have others helping you in making the decisions?"

"They would give me their opinions, but I would have the final say so, yes." Coin confirmed.

"You'd be the decision maker," Peeta pondered this for a moment.
"What if you don't agree with the heads of the other districts?"

"As I said Peeta, the final say, as to what's best for the people of this nation, would be mine." Coin's answer wasn't what Peeta was hoping for. Ideally he would've liked her to say that she'd work with the other heads and find a compromise, enabling the government to work towards a solution that was fair for everyone; instead he got a load of political crap. Now Peeta knew the truth, she might not present herself as harsh and calculating as President Snow, but she'd run the nation the same way, making all the decisions on her own. Surrounding herself with people that were supposed to help run Panem, but did

nothing more than put on a good show. "Have I answered all of your questions to your satisfaction, Peeta?"

'I wouldn't say to my satisfaction,' he thought to himself before saying, "Why don't we get to my list of demands, ma'am." Alma was gone as far as Peeta was concerned. It was time to get down to business with President Coin. "First, you will not harm, or attempt to harm, my child or the Valero's child. Oh, and let me be clear here President Coin, if you go back on any of these demands, Katniss and I will both step down as your figureheads. You can try and press charges against me...Effie...any of the prisoners that were held at the Capitol, but after Effie's warning that saved the lives of the people here in Thirteen, and your propos that said, 'Our Jabberjay's silence speaks volumes,' I'm fairly sure no court in their right mind would convict us." He could see Coin beginning to get her hackles up, but continued on with the things that he and Katniss had discussed the night he came to Thirteen. "You will not send Katniss out into any of the districts. As long as I'm able, it will be me going out to film your propos, not my wife. Putting her and our baby in danger is now a thing of the past. You'll allow her to stay in Thirteen as long as she needs to. As far as cameras go, no more filming us without our permission. We find one camera...one microphone...one itsy bitsy transmitter of any sort hidden in order to capture our private moments together, we're done. You can have us three times a week while we're in Thirteen..."

"Three times a week won't be nearly satisfactory," Coin interrupted with a clipped tone.

"Fine, then you can have us...every other day, but that's it. No more."

"Agreed," Coin said between gritted teeth.

"And you only get us from after breakfast until two in the afternoon." He knew she'd never agree to that, but he needed wiggle room.

"That will not work," she shook her head in frustration. "Nine am to Nine pm," she offered.

"Nine am up to Reflection," Peeta countered.

"Done," Coin agreed.

"If you need us to shoot something at night, you're to ask us first, and if we say no, then it's no. If there's a situation like today, then we'll obviously make adjustments for special circumstances, but your camera crews will no longer dictate our lives." Peeta went on and added, "No taking out your anger...frustrations or anything else out on our friends and family. In other words, I don't want to find that Prim has lost her medical privileges because Katniss and I want some semblance of a life." It was something President Snow was quite good at. Exacting revenge, and Peeta needed to make sure she was on board with him. "Understand?" Coin gave him a brusque nod and narrowed her eyes in anger. "And no more schedules tattooed on our arms, because we're not going to follow them anyway." It was one of Katniss' biggest complaints about being in Thirteen, the rigid schedules that left no room for spontaneity. Peeta had yet to experience it since his only job was to get better and film propos, but he was pretty sure once he left the room, Coin would probably have him following the rules the other residents did. "We'll shove our arm in your wall so it can identify us, but we're not going to environmental classes or anything like that. Katniss and I have enough on our plates to worry about. If we have a meeting to attend, that's fine, but we're not going to go to your classes, so stop wasting your precious ink. We also won't be wearing tracking bracelets," he lifted his wrist and shook the thin device that had been slapped on him that morning. You don't need to know where we are twenty-four hours a day."

"That poses a security issue."

He tried to find a compromise. "If we leave the facility, and when we're supposed to be with the camera crews, we'll wear them, other than that...no bracelets."

"I'll have to get back to you on that, Mr. Mellark."

"Why?"

Coin gave him a look of disbelief. "Mr. Mellark, we're talking about the well-being of our Mockingjay and Jabberjay here. I must get with the head of security and work out arrangements."

"President Coin, I thought I made myself crystal clear when I started this conversation...Katniss and I will not be your figureheads until you've agreed to my demands." He quirked a brow at her and questioned her authority, "Now, if the president of Thirteen has to get permission from her head of..."

Coin held up a hand to silence him. "What if I agree that you won't have to wear them on your off time, but you will have to wear them at night? Katniss has a tendency to wander around the facility, and I'd rather she not get into trouble." She smirked at Peeta, "It would be simpler if you could get your wife to show some control and prevent her from breaking every rule we have set in place to safeguard our district."

"You're going to insert a camera crew in the middle of our lives...film almost every move we make ...you've already invaded our privacy without our permission, so can you blame her for wanting some time to herself?" This was a sticking point for Peeta. "President Coin, you don't have any victors here in Thirteen other than the ones that came to you from the rebellion, so I can't imagine you'd understand what nights are like for us. To put it mildly, they're...horrifying." Darkness equaled nightmares, but telling someone like Coin that would do no

good. Peeta had to find a way to explain why they all had a tendency to roam around their surroundings when nighttime came, and why being continuously monitored caused the hairs on the back of your neck to stand on end. "You want to sleep, but you can't without being plagued with visions of the dead children you've murdered." He watched as Coin's jaw stiffened. "Some of the worst nightmares are the ones in which you're hunted, and you've seen the Games...you know when the Careers liked to hunt."

"I do."

A chill shot down Peeta's spine as images of a dark forest, illuminated by the moon's glow entered his mind, bringing him back temporarily back to the first arena, and the way his skin crawled as he followed the Careers through the woods in search of other tributes. "Now imagine trying to find a place to hide," he brought her on the nerve wracking journey with him, "The only problem is, you can't, because the Capitol is constantly tracking your every move. You try your best to convince yourself that you can find someplace safe to hide, but the cameras are there and the Gamemakers are watching...manipulating the Games until you...the prey....walk right into the path of the hunter." He turned his attention to Coin and saw her tough exterior slightly crack as she gave herself a little shimmy. "No tracking devices, Alma. You're asking us to place our trust in you...that's all we're asking in return."

She begrudgingly conceded to his request. "No tracking devices on your off time, however, you must wear them when you work with Plutarch or his film crew, and always when you leave the security of Thirteen's facility."

With each demand Peeta made, he carefully wrote it out on his piece of paper. "Finally, Katniss and I are going to be going on dates, and I'd

like to take her on some picnics by that oak tree we were filming in front of today. I understand that you'll need to post a guard, as a matter of fact, I'd prefer it if we did have a guard with us until I'm comfortable being alone with her. Preferably not Gale Hawthorne however, if we want time alone, I'll expect whoever it is that's with us to respect our request. I'm sure you won't have a problem with our packing a meal to take with us, will you?"

"Now that we know about her pregnancy, Katniss will be provided with a new nutritional allowance. I am aware that expectant mothers aren't always able to eat at scheduled hours." She paused. "I will agree, and will make sure she has increased supplements available in her quarters if she finds herself in need of sustenance at odd hours of the day."

"Thanks." It was more than he asked for. "I'm sure Katniss will appreciate it. I'm assuming Dr. Valero already has those increased supplements available to her too."

Coin's lip twitched. "She will."

"Well, that about does it for me." Peeta sat back in his chair and said, "Do these terms sound fair to you?"

"Not particularly, but do I have a choice?" Coin's nostrils flared.

"Yes, you do. You're more than capable of saying no, and I'll accept that." Coin's only response was a disgusted smirk. "There is one more little thing I'd like to do, ma'am."

Coin glared at him, "What's that?"

Anyone who knew Peeta Mellark prior to his hijacking would never expect him to say what he was about to. "I want to kill Snow."

"You'll have to flip a coin with your wife for that one."

"Since she won't be leaving Thirteen, I don't think that will be a problem." He wrote out the last demand then placed the pen on the piece of paper and said, "Sign it, and we've got a deal. Don't sign it, and I'll let Katniss know that she can step down as the Mockingjay, and I'll be facing charges of treason. I'm sure that will do a *world* of good for the war effort." Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin when she picked up the pen and scrawled out her name. "Thank you President Coin. If you'd like to make a copy of this, I'd be happy to wait, but I'll need the original."

She took it from his hand and scanned it into a computer then handed it back to him. "I'll hold a mandatory meeting tomorrow during reflection to announce your official position as the Jabberjay."

"And of course, you'll congratulate Katniss and I on our good fortune...maybe say something about how brave she was to keep the pregnancy a secret so she could take up her position as the Mockingjay...you know...really make her sound courageous, because I think we both know she is, and she deserves some recognition on your part for what you put her through." Peeta had tried to get to know the woman, he gave her a chance, but he could honestly say there were very few redeeming qualities about the prospective new president of Panem. She had admitted to everything Katniss told him about aborting their baby, not once apologizing for her actions, believing she was doing the right thing, never even making an attempt at showing remorse for contemplating such a heinous act. "Hell, you can even say you didn't know she was still pregnant. It should be a nice change of pace for you, not lying about the baby." A sudden surge of anger rushed through him, telling Peeta it was time to vacate the premises, or he'd be brought up on much more serious charges than treason. "If we're all done here, I'll be on my way."

"Wish I could say it was a pleasure, *soldier* Mellark."

"I'm guessing that's your way of telling me I work for you now," Coin gave him a conniving arch of her brow in answer. "There's just one more thing before we make this official." Peeta leaned his lips close to her ear and whispered so quietly that the security cameras he knew were in the room couldn't pick up what he was saying allowing himself a small amount of pleasure when he said, "Alma, if you even think about hurting Katniss or my daughter again, I'll make your death very slow, very bloody, and *very* painful." He pulled back, satisfied with the stunned expression on her face. "As I said to Snow, I am a man of my word." He turned on his heels, waved the signed list of demands in the air and left Coin seething in silence. As much as Peeta hated to do it, he had to break his word to Katniss. There was no way he could go to Special Defense now. He barely made it to the elevator before he started pounding his fists against the floor...on the wall... Snow's face was everywhere, and no matter how hard...how many times Peeta smashed his fist into it, the glowing images of his torturer continued to torment him.

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"Hey, Haymitch," Gale called to him. "Take a look at this."

The sight of Effie sitting with a sheet wrapped around her shoulders, covering her bodice, with the dead Peacekeeper's head in her lap,

broke his heart. Haymitch thought about leaving her to her mourning, but the woman would be pissed as hell if he didn't call her over. "Effie, you need to take a look at this." When she didn't budge he said, "It's Portia."

Every ounce of energy was sapped from Effie's limbs. "Haymitch..." unable to ask for help verbally, she lifted her hand to him, allowing him to guide her towards the rest of the group that had gathered around the computer Plutarch had given her. The sight of President Snow standing in the middle of the stage with the remaining members of Peeta's prep team and Portia in cuffs caused her throat to go dry. "Por..." a breath caught in her chest, her stomach clenched as her legs began to give way.

"Come on sweetheart," Haymitch sat her on the corner of a seat, holding her in place. "If you don't want to watch this, you don't have to."

"No..." her fingertips played nervously across her throat, "...I must see the consequences of my...unreasonable demands."

"What are you talking about?" Haymitch took a crouching position in front of her in order to look her in the eyes. "Effie what demands?"

Tear filled blank eyes stared straight ahead as her hollow Capitol voice spoke, "To rescue me."

"We didn't come here because of that message you sent, Effie. We came here because Katniss and Peeta need you." Haymitch rested his hands on her shoulders. "I need you, so quit taking all the blame for the things Snow's done."

Effie gave her head a tiny nod and faced the screen. "Could you turn it up please?"

"...Mason, Annie Cresta, and Effie Trinket's escape," Snow motioned for a group of Peacekeepers to make their way on stage behind the prisoners. His beady little eyes narrowed dangerously at the camera, he nodded at the first Peacekeeper and Apria, the female member of Peeta's prep team began to scream. The scream barely escaped from her as the Peacekeeper drew his knife across her throat leaving a gaping, dark red slash for all to see. The people of the Capitol were no strangers to death, they thrived on the gore of the Games, but these people on stage weren't tributes, they were some of their own. "Our very own residents...people who were supposed to represent this great nation with pride, have turned their back on their government and joined forces with the rebels," Snow spoke to his people. "Ask yourselves, do you know your neighbors as well as you think you do? How many of you have seen these rebels walking amongst the streets, at parties...socializing without a care in the world? All the while they were gathering information for the rebellion...feeding it to the insects that threaten to infest our great society, and now we must rid ourselves of these vermin." Snow paced in front of Horton, Peeta's male prep team member and gave the Peacekeeper a nod. "This is how we, at the Capitol, crush pests such as yourselves." The Peacekeeper began to punch Horton with metal studded gloves, pounding at his face until it was nothing more than a bloody pulp of flesh. "Finish him," Snow ordered, and the guard pulled out a gun, putting a bullet between Horton's eyes. Snow walked around Portia in an almost tantalizing manner. "And you...Portia. Once beloved stylist. Your designs caused quite the stir here at the Capitol." Snow snapped his head around towards the camera. "How many of you in the Capitol have worn those fiery displays of a Mockingjay and Jabberjay in support of the rebel's cause?"

"Thousands!" Portia yelled out receiving a brutal whack in the stomach.

"Your death will be my favorite," Snow sneered at her. "However, I am not as barbaric as those that are currently threatening our peaceful civilization, so... I am willing to offer you one last opportunity to make amends. Confess publicly, your rebellious sins...inform us of their plans, and I shall make your death swift."

Portia was breathing heavily; obviously trying to catch her breath from the Peacekeeper's punch, lifted her chin high and spoke. "I will confess," she said, sounding winded from the Peacekeeper's punch. "What President Snow said is true. I am a rebel...and..." her eyes glistened into the camera lens, "...damn proud of it! Freedom's in flight! Freedom's in..." the barrel of a gun was placed against Portia's temple and the trigger pulled. Her bloody spray stained his white suit, matching gloves and dripped off of his face. "As you can see Peeta, I too am a man of my word. Her death was swift, was it not?" Snow dangled the gun he used to shoot Portia from his fingertip; a Peacekeeper quickly took the weapon and tucked it into his belt. A fresh linen handkerchief was dabbed at the bits of flesh that had blown back against his face, smearing it across his skin and Snow shook his head back and forth as though he were very disappointed. "*This* isn't what I wanted," he gestured towards the three dead bodies that lay at his feet, puddles of dark red blood slowly pooled together. "This was the price you rebels paid for breaking into the Capitol to free treasonous prisoners." His fingers curled into a ball, his voice harsh. "There are people in this country that do not understand how important our way of life is. There are rules that must be followed in order to safeguard our nation, and these rebels ignore them as if they do not mean a thing...as though they have absolutely no value for human life. Look around," Snow's tone changed to a more reasonable one. "Is this the life you want? I am speaking to you Katniss....Peeta. You speak of the possibility of your daughter entering the arena. What about the children in the districts that are dying right now because of the war *you* have started? Think very carefully Mr. Mellark...Miss.

Everdeen...is this the future you want for your child? A world where no life is sacred? We must put our differences to rest. Turn yourselves in, and stop the unnecessary slaughter of the innocent," Snow gave his head a tiny nod and the television screen showed horrific images of dead children lying next to the wreckage of a school, another that showed a little girl clasping at an adult's hand, crying at the top of her lungs. The camera panned out to show the hand the child held onto was nothing more than a limb, the person it had belonged to was gone. The final picture was of a mother nursing her infant. The woman wore a light gray nightgown, had long dark hair pulled over one shoulder and a bullet hole in the center of her forehead. The baby's clouded eyes were lifeless, its tiny hands still formed in the shape of a ball, pressing against its mother's breast, as though it died while feeding. The nation's seal filled the screen ending the broadcast which went immediately to news coverage of the shortages in the Capitol.

"I wonder if Katniss and Peeta saw that." Gale asked Haymitch who had wandered closer to the computer screen in order to get a better view.

Haymitch made a little clucking noise with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Who knows? Probably not Peeta, can't imagine seeing something like that would help his whole, flashback thing."

"Flashback?" Gale asked.

"Eh...that's what Beetee calls it when Peeta flies off the handle. Something about each episode bringing him back to the moments when they tortured him," Haymitch gave his head a little shake. "Damn shame."

"God, he keeps reliving his torture?" Gale huffed. "And Katniss wonders why I hate those Capitol snobs..." he stopped himself from talking when he saw the expression on Haymitch's face. "I'm not

saying they're all like that," Gale attempted to cover. "I didn't mean anything by that Eff...Effie?" He began quickly scanning the craft for the woman that had been there only a few minutes before.

"Effie?" Haymitch looked around and saw her. The sheet she had draped over her was in a pool between him and the spot where Effie sat with Steven's head cradled in her arms. "Come on sweetheart," Haymitch attempted to lift her off the floor of the hovercraft where she sat frantically rocking back and forth. "Trinkie," he sat behind her and wrapped his arms around her trying to hold her still, instead he wound up matching her rhythm. "Effie?" She was staring into space, her eyes blank. "Hey, Justus, I think you need to take a look at her. Something's not right here." Haymitch waved a hand in front of her face. "Effie. Damn it Effie answer me!" He screamed as he shook her by the upper arms.

"Is she in shock?" Gale crouched down next to Haymitch as Justus began digging through a first aid kit. He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes and said, "Effie? Hey, Effie!" Gale turned towards Haymitch and said, "She's out of it."

Justus made motion for them to remove Steven from her arms, but the moment they did she let out a loud, high pitched wail, and didn't stop until they released the Peacekeeper's body.

"Geez," Haymitch ran his hand over his face. "Johanna, what the hell happened to her in there?" He waited for an answer, and got none. Johanna had fallen into a deep sleep, and Annie had been given a sedative in order to stop her from crying. "Shit! SHIT!" Haymitch shook Effie again, "Come on, Trinkie, don't flake on me." Justus tapped his fingers against the outside of a syringe, and then plunged it into Effie's arm. It took only a few seconds for her eyes to close and her body to

fall into Haymitch's arms. "Christ sake, Effie," he pressed his lips against her forehead; "Whatcha gotta go and freak out on me for?"

The moment Effie was knocked out Justus and Gale lifted Steven's body and placed it out of sight. "Think she went into shock?" Gale asked. Justus shrugged and simultaneously nodded. It was times like these that Gale wished he had paid attention in those sign language classes he was forced to take. "So you think it's more than just shock?" Justus nodded, and began moving his hands. About the only thing Gale understood was the sign for danger, so he simply nodded his head, with a dumbfounded look on his face, and stayed quiet as Haymitch, read the computer screen Justus typed his suspicions on.

"What do you mean post-traumatic stress? From what!? Effie's seen worse than this before!" Haymitch couldn't believe what was going on. He had finally gotten Effie back and it was like she had checked out. The lights were on and no one was home. He read over the notes Justus typed out for him, wanting more of an explanation, and getting none. He'd have to wait until Effie woke up to see how she was doing, and if Justus was right, then Haymitch would have an even longer wait until they got to Thirteen and a doctor examined her. Considering they were taking a roundabout way of getting there, the trip that would normally take about three and a half hours was now going to take twice as long, plus that burst of energy they used up escaping the Capitol hovercrafts meant that they had to travel at a slower pace. Haymitch kept himself busy, stripping Effie of what little clothes she had on, making sure to keep her naked body hidden from the others on the hovercraft, wondering if she would be mortified if she knew he had seen her in a less than *composed state of attire*. He carefully cleaned each of the wounds she had on her body wanting an explanation...revenge for each and every one of them, applied medicated balm...secured bandages, then wrapped her back up in one of the sheets Lavinia had gotten from the medical supplies. He

couldn't stop thinking about how different Effie was now compared to the woman he had met over a decade earlier. She didn't even bat an eye when she ripped her shirt off to staunch the flow of Steven's blood today, but over ten years ago, Effie Trinket wouldn't have taken one of her precious white gloves off in public.

"Must you really consume alcohol with breakfast Mr. Abernathy?" Effie tugged on the hem of her white lace gloves and sipped at her tea with a pinky sticking up in the air. "Perhaps you'd like a cup of tea, or coffee?" Haymitch hated the way she spoke. She couldn't just say coffee. It was coffeeeeee with the accent on the eeeee. As far as he was concerned, listening to her speak was the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard. "I'd be happy to pour you a cup," Effie snapped her fingers in the air for an attendant to perform the action.

*"Thought you said, **you'd** pour me a cup," Haymitch checked her out through bloodshot eyes. He mimicked her snapping motion, making it overly dramatic, and said, "If that's your way of getting things done sweetheart, I'd hate to see how you please a man."*

"Why I never!" Effie flustered, her gloved fingers flew to her high collared neck.

"Maybe that's your problem," Haymitch gave her a lecherously playful look, licked his lips, quite disgustingly, and said; "maybe you should try it. Might loosen your tight ass up a bit." He sat back in his chair and started picking the raisins out of the slice of toast on his plate.

"Though, I'll say it again...you do have a sweet, sweeeet ass." He could see Effie bristling from the corner of his eye, her powdery white face turning beet red beneath the layers of makeup, the bumble bees at the end of her false eyelashes fluttering up and down at a rapid rate.

"Mr. Abernathy," Effie started.

"Why don't we cut the formalities, you can call me Haymitch, sweetheart, and I'll call you..."

"I have already told you once; you can call me Miss. Trinket!"

"Trinket...Effie...Trinket...Effie..." Haymitch began moving his hands like a scale trying to weigh out which name he preferred. "Hmmm..." His brows shot up, "I've got it! Trinkie."

"Don't you dare!"

"What's wrong Trinkie? Don't like your name?" Normally these rides to the Capitol on the Tribute Train were depressing as sin, but Haymitch had to admit he was enjoying himself with the new escort.

"I most certainly do not!" Effie's jaw tightened. "You," she pointed a finger at him. "You need to learn some manners, Mr. Abernathy."

"Haymitch," he corrected. "And you need to let loose a little. All that uppity, self-righteous...Capitol crap..." he pointed the tip of his knife at her before buttering the raisin free bread, "...that's not good for you. You're gonna get an ulcer."

"The only thing that will give me an ulcer is you," Effie pursed her lips, threw her napkin on her plate and made to leave.

"Hey, where ya going?" Haymitch didn't want the woman to leave. If she did then he'd be stuck with his thoughts until his tributes showed up, and that would be even worse.

"Did you honestly think I'd eat breakfast with the likes of you after the way you've spoken to me?" Effie gave off the impression of standing tall, but Haymitch could tell if she took off those six inch spikes she

was wearing, she'd barely reach his shoulder. "I am going to wake our..."

"Wait," he just wasn't ready to send the newest set of kids off to their deaths yet. "Let 'em sleep a little longer. They had a helluva day yesterday."

Effie puckered her lips as though she had just tasted something sour, looked out the window at the passing foliage, and said, "Ten minutes, then I must wake them so they can eat before they get to the Remake Center. We don't want them going hungry before meeting their stylists."

"Yeah...right," Haymitch mumbled and thought maybe he should've let her leave after all. She was a little too excited about the prospect of the Games, but they all were. All those Capitol snobs got their rocks off watching kids die. "Sit down," he practically ordered her. "Tell me why you're here." Effie arched a bleached brow in his direction, lifted his thin tomato juice, and took a whiff. "What the hell are you doin'?"

Effie placed the glass back down and said, "I was wondering what it was you were drinking that caused you to forget why I am on a Tribute Train. Fortunately for me, I did not smell anything other than tomato juice, which, I must say, came as quite a shock to me. Why, I almost passed out from sheer amazement."

Haymitch let out a belly laugh so loud Effie actually cracked a smile. "Holy shit, you've actually got a sense of humor."

"Mr. Abernathy."

"Haymitch," he corrected again.

"I tell you what, I will be happy to call you...Haymitch, if you could please refrain from using such barbaric language in my presence." Effie tilted her chin to the side. "Do we have a deal?"

Haymitch gave it some thought, he could torment the woman, but he was pretty sure his presence alone would do that, and she really wasn't that bad looking...she did make him laugh...her nagging left much to be desired, but he could always lock himself in his room if she got on his nerves..., "Deal," he stuck his hand out to shake on it.

"Haymitch!" Effie's lips tightened when she saw the wad of butter he had smeared on her gloves.

"Whoops," he smirked.

"Now what am I going to do? These are the only pair of gloves that match this outfit!" She spoke as though she were the one being thrown into the arena in less than a week.

"So take 'em off. Who gives a shit...damn...crap?" He smiled, quite pleased with himself for covering so quickly.

"Are you completely insane?" Her voice aghast. "I couldn't dream...my goodness..."

"What the hell's the problem here?"

"Do you have any idea how many hands I have to shake today? Why...going without gloves...perhaps you can get away with that sort of thing in District Twelve, but in the Capitol, we have something called manners."

Haymitch let out a burst of laughter. "You mean to tell me, you can't shake people's hands without wearing gloves? What are you

a...germaphobe or..." he lifted his knife in the air when he realized what the other reason might be, "...or is letting your skin come in contact with another man's too provocative a thing for a lady such as yourself?"

"Why!" Effie slammed her palms on the table. "You are a despicable pig! Nothing more than a...vile little man!"

"Get used to it sweetheart."

"DO NOT CALL ME SWEETHEART!" Effie yelled out so loud the attendants turned to see what was happening.

"No problem." Haymitch waited until she was almost out of the train car before calling out, "See ya later...TRINKIE!" He lifted his feet onto the seat next to him, crossed them at the ankles and thought, 'Yup, this is gonna be fun.'

The cold from the hovercraft's floor seeped through the uniform Haymitch was wearing. The need to keep Effie safe and warm consumed him as he lifted her sheet covered body off of the floor and cradled her in his arms. He'd have given anything in the world to have his prissy little nag back, to hear her call him her vile little man once more, but something inside of him said she was gone, severely damaged by the events that occurred while she was playing her part as a rebel spy. That Steven Tanner and Portia's deaths were going to weigh heavily on her heart for quite some time. Haymitch pressed his lips firmly against Effie's forehead and choked out, "I came back for ya, Trinkie. Just like I promised. Now ya gotta come back to me." He clutched her limp body to his chest, swearing that he'd never leave her side again.

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They had spent the majority of the day in Special Weaponry throwing knives, taking aim at targets with the weapons that Beetee had created for them, trying their best to avoid looking at the ticking clock. Every time the door opened and someone entered the area, Katniss and Finnick exchanged looks, their expressions getting more and more worn as the day progressed.

"Thought Peeta would be down here for sure," Finnick said offhandedly.

"He's meeting with Coin." Katniss left it at that, not wanting to expound any further. 'Where the hell is he?' She wondered with each passing hour that went by. They ate the lunch that had been brought to them in silence, Finnick concerned for Annie's safety, Katniss worried about...everything, but Peeta's absence was at the forefront of her mind. 'If he's not back in an hour I'm going to look for him,' she told herself, yet three hours later she stood in front of a target with her bow and arrow in hand taking shots that would be considered simple on any given day of the week, but that day hitting the target dead center was becoming a challenge. The dinner hour was drawing near when Katniss pushed herself off of the bench in the Meadowlark room and said, "I'm going to look for Peeta."

"I'll come with you," Finnick stood, but was stopped.

"No," her hand pressed against his chest to sit him back down. "He and I have some things to talk over, and we can't do that if we've got company."

"You want me to wait here by myself?" Finnick's expression was like that of a little boy being abandoned.

"I won't be long, Finnick," she made her excuses. "An hour...maybe less."

His dejected, "Sure...okay," made her feel like a pile of crap for leaving him behind.

"Okay, what if you took one section of Thirteen and I took another? We could meet up back here in...forty five minutes?" Katniss hoped this would be satisfactory, plus the extra set of eyes wouldn't hurt.

"Sounds good," Finnick got to his feet thrilled with the idea of something purposeful to do. "Where should I start? The hospital?"

"Hospital?" Katniss headed towards the door then paused. There was only one reason she could think of that Peeta wouldn't show up, and that's if he had another relapse. "My God," she turned her worry gaze to Finnick. "You think something's wrong?"

Finnick followed her as she started running out of the department. "I don't know. I just figured...he's living there, right?"

"Beetee?" Katniss asked the first person she saw.

"He was called to medical late this morning," a passing worker told her.

The pumping of her legs as she ran caused a slight stitch in her side. Katniss clutched at her lower abdomen unknowingly. "Slow down, Katniss," Finnick called to her. "If he's there, he's not going anywhere."

It made sense, but that didn't make a bit of difference. Katniss told herself that if something was seriously wrong with Peeta, her mother, Prim...Regina...someone would have found her, told her about it, but why would they? With their spotty history it was possible her family still thought that Peeta wanted nothing to do with her, and they were playing a role for the cameras today. She tried not to think the worst of him...that maybe he was playing a role earlier and found she didn't really care. Imagining the worst, that Peeta had another violent episode...that maybe he attacked Coin, was shot and killed, or maybe the effects of the hijacking had finally killed him, were the only things that mattered. She practically collapsed when she reached the hospital room she had woken up in, finding it empty. "Where is he?"

"Don't know," Finnick looked down the hall. "Let's go that way. There are lights on."

The group of people gathered around the window outside of a hospital room stopped Katniss dead in her tracks. "What's wrong with him?" She asked from her frozen position afraid to look through the glass for fear of what could be on the other side.

"Katniss," Prim reached a hand out and pulled her closer. "About time you got here," her sister's tone was scolding.

"Prim, where is he?" She urged her rapidly beating heart to slow down for fear that her bracelet would go off.

"Right behind you," the sound of Peeta's voice had Katniss turning towards him.

"Oh my God," Katniss moved out of instinct and hugged him. "I waited for you, but you never...and I got so mad...and we threw knives, but I didn't picture your face...then..." Katniss could hear herself rambling on and on like a fool yet she couldn't seem to stop, "...I was going to look, then Finnick said hospital...I didn't think...I should have..."

"Hey," Peeta buried his nose in the hair above her ear taking in her scent. "Calm down. You're here now."

"Yeah," she pulled away from him. "Are you okay?"

He lifted his bandaged right hand; his left was cuffed to a wheelchair. "You should see the other guy." Katniss' brows shot up. "I'm just kidding Katniss."

"He's doing much better now if you'd like to join us?" Beetee asked from his spot next to Prim.

"Sure," Katniss followed a group into the room leaving Finnick behind with a couple of nurses to occupy his time. "What happened?"

"Seems Peeta had another flashback earlier." Katniss hated the term Beetee had come up with to describe the violent outbursts Peeta had been having. Every time he said the word it seemed to reinforce the unending hold Snow had on Peeta. "Fortunately the only thing to sustain some damage, other than Peeta of course was the elevator's control panel." Beetee gave Peeta's shoulder a pat. "You can put your worries to rest, Peeta. It's been fixed."

'Yeah, because a control panel is what we're concerned about,' Katniss rolled her eyes and clutched her arms over her chest. "So what happened to his hand? Is it broken?"

"Just a few cuts and some bruising."

"It'll teach me to take on a steel box," Peeta chided Beetee as he was unlocked from the wheelchair and latched onto the bed.

"Do you have to keep him chained up?" Katniss asked with a furrowed brow. "He seems fine now."

"I asked them to keep me handcuffed for the time being," Peeta gave her a pathetic grin. "Makes me feel a little more comfortable when people are around."

"Okay," Katniss gave him a tiny nod.

"Why don't we talk about Peeta's treatments?" Beetee took a seat. "We've been using morphling as a means to curb your temper, and though it has been quite successful, it will not counteract the effects of the tracker jacker venom."

"What you're saying is there are no treatments for this. You've said it already...told us this over and over again. Why can't you people just get to the damn point? Peeta's going to be..."

Katniss began going on a minor rampage until she felt his eyes on her, and her father in law's quiet voice interrupted her. "That's enough, Katniss." Katniss scowled, not too pleased with being talked to like a toddler.

"You should be sitting down," Prim pulled up a chair for her sister, "and you shouldn't be getting worked up."

"I'm not sure this is the place for a child," Plutarch glanced down at Prim. "Perhaps you should leave the room while we discuss..."

"I wouldn't try it," Prim snapped before any of her family members could come to her defense. "You even attempt to remove me, I'll walk

straight into surgery and tell my mother about this, and she doesn't look too kindly on Gamemakers trying to run my brother and sister's lives, especially when they're doing such a poor job of it, so I'd keep your objections to yourself."

"Young lady," Plutarch started, but it was Prim that finished the conversation.

"Funny how you thought I was old enough to have my name pulled out of a reaping ball, but don't think I should be here for this discussion," she tapped her foot on the floor and crossed her arms over her chest mirroring her sister's image.

Beetee cleared his throat after a few seconds of Prim's condemning stare. "As I was saying, the morphling alone is not going to be enough to counteract the tracker jacker venom, so yes Katniss...for the time being, Peeta will be left with the residual effects of his torture."

The room held a somber tone. "At least they didn't get you too, Katniss. I don't even want to imagine what this would have done to you in your condition," Peeta lifted his wounded hand to Katniss' arm and let it trail downward.

"Oh my gosh," Prim's face lit up. "That's it, Peeta. Katniss is the answer." She turned to her sister and said, "You and the baby are going to put an end to Peeta's flashbacks."

The entire room faced Prim. "What are you thinking young lady?" Plutarch asked.

"You people," she pointed at the Gamemaker, "tried to pit Katniss and Peeta against each other in the arena with a gas form of the venom, but she wasn't bothered by it at all."

"It stunk to high hell," Katniss remarked.

"Beetee, you said the proteins in Katniss' system probably had a lot to do with it, what if we were to take samples from her...make an antidote based on that?" Prim's doe eyes were full of hope as they waited for the man to answer.

"Yes...yes, I see what you're saying, Prim. Excellent idea. We've already identified the Capitol's failed attempt at an antidote, but that doesn't mean we can't create one of our own." Beetee's finger flew up in the air, the chair he was sitting on rolled backwards as he made his way out of the room. "We'll need to access Katniss' medical files...see her..." he turned to Prim, "Are you coming?"

"Yeah." She glared up at Plutarch and said, "Or are you afraid the science labs aren't a place for a child?"

Bing let out a little snort of air. "Come on, Primrose. I'll go with you." He gave Peeta and Katniss a quick farewell.

"That sister of yours is quite..." Plutarch searched for the appropriate word, "...spirited."

"Thanks," Katniss could have punched the former Head Gamemaker for the way he treated Prim.

"Takes after Katniss," Peeta said with pride. The quirk at Katniss' lips hinting at a smile told him he had said the right thing. "Plutarch, if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone with Katniss now."

"Oh, yes. I should probably check on Finnick anyway."

Katniss waited until they were alone before complaining to Peeta, "Why is it he could stay in the room, but Prim couldn't? Sometimes the way these people think really throws me for a loop."

"I don't think he'll be making the mistake of asking Prim to leave anytime soon." Peeta rested his head against the pillow. "Sorry I didn't come straight downstairs after my meeting with Coin. I barely got out of there without losing it completely."

"She has that same effect on me," Katniss pulled her chair up to the side of his bed. "We don't have to talk about this now if you don't want to." They still hadn't discussed the incident with the interview, and right now, Katniss didn't think Peeta was up to it. "As a matter of fact...we don't have to talk about anything if you don't want to. We can just...sit."

Peeta let his head roll towards her. "Good. Right now the only thing on my mind is that damn rescue mission." He scooted to the side of his bed and lifted his blanket in invitation to her.

She didn't think twice about climbing next to him, resting her head against his chest and letting the sound of his beating heart ease her fears. Hours ticked away in silence. Neither of them brought up their disagreement, his meeting with Coin or the fact that this was the first time he held her in his arms since the night he came to Thirteen.

"They've been gone for a long time."

"Fifteen hours," she lifted her worried eyes to his. "Peeta, what if they didn't get out?"

"They got out." He rubbed his cheek against the top of her head.

"But what if..."

The door flew open, Finnick stood on the other side of it. "They're back! They're back!"

"Where are they?" Peeta made an attempt at sitting up only to have his cuffed hand yank on the metal bed frame as Katniss' feet hit the floor.

"On their way to the hospital." Finnick pushed Peeta's bed down the hall, past the guard that was now a permanent fixture wherever Peeta went, and towards the large waiting area. "They should be here any seco..."

"FINNICK! FINNICK!"

"ANNIE!" Katniss and Peeta watched as the pair ran straight into each other's arms, flattening themselves up against a wall. The sheet of material covering Annie clenched in her fist between their bodies. The sound of happiness through tears filled the hallway, causing Katniss' stomach to clench.

"Katniss?" a soft voice spoke to her from a hospital bed, blue eyes pierced hers.

"Yeah," guilt seeped through her for the way she talked to him earlier.

"Sorry I didn't tell you about Plutarch's earpiece."

She leaned over him and pushed a piece of hair away from his eyes. "I know."

"Look at them," Peeta let his focus drift back towards Annie and Finnick. "I'm almost jealous of them."

Anyone that looked at the pair would never question their love for each other, unlike Katniss and Peeta. "Me too."

"Johanna," Peeta saw her limp, battered body being wheeled towards them. "Is she alive?" He panicked when no one answered him right away. "Is she alive!?"

"Yes," Boggs answered as he walked down the hall. "Effie's on her way in now."

Katniss stood, gripping the edge of Peeta's bed expecting to hear the clicking of her escort's heels, her puffy golden wig, but the sight that greeted her was far from a proper Capitol escort. Snow white skin was covered in various shades of black and purple bruises, cuts that had scabbed over, some fresh, were slashed across her dainty flesh. Black puffy circles, a combination of lack of sleep and old makeup formed half-moons under her eyes, at the back of her head a matted tuft of blond hair. "Effie!" Katniss gripped Peeta's cuffed hand in hers and squeezed.

"Out of the way!" Haymitch called out. "Move!"

"What...what's wrong with her?" Peeta's voice was trembling. "Effie!? Eff...MOM!" He screamed at the top of his lungs as Haymitch ran behind the medical team pushing her bed.

"He's okay," Katniss said more to herself than Peeta. "He's okay."

"Who is?" Peeta saw Gale making long strides towards them. His breathing began to grow out of control at Katniss' response to seeing him. "Guard!" The call was only made once as they were standing within a few yards of Peeta. "Take me to Effie Trinket please." He threw a condemning look in Katniss' direction, "You two can stay here and get reacquainted. I'm going to check on Effie and Johanna."

"Peeta," Katniss' head snapped in the direction he was being wheeled in. She was torn, desperately wanting to follow Peeta to find out what

was wrong with Effie, but she had to make sure Gale was okay. She moved swiftly in the opposite direction of Peeta towards Gale, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," he grinned at her. "Was a close call, but we got most of them out alive."

"I have to go," Katniss gave him a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry Gale; I need to find out about Effie."

"Go ahead," he called to her. "I'll check on Johanna and catch up with you."

"Thanks," she yelled back over her shoulder as she made her way towards the loud trauma room where Effie had been taken. The nagging headache that had been plaguing her since she woke up that morning never quite went away. It had started as a dull ache then gradually got worse as the day went on. When a sharp pain shot through Katniss' eyes, like someone had taken an ice pick to her temples, her pace slowed down until she stopped completely, resting against a wall. 'Something's wrong,' she knew it in her very core. "Something is very wrong," the corridor began to close in on her just as the alarm on her wrist went off.

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"What's wrong with her?" The head of Peeta's bed had been lifted allowing him to take up a sitting position.

"I don't know, boy," Haymitch's pained expression came through in his voice. "She was fine...talking...fighting," he let out a little sniff, "you shoulda seen her out there. She was shooting at Snow's army like...like it was her name that had been put in a reaping bowl for the past couple of decades." He looked to Peeta, "Wouldn't leave the damn Capitol unless we took that Peacekeeper with us."

"Mr. Tanner?"

"Yeah," Haymitch answered Peeta's question.

"Where is he?"

There was regret in Haymitch' tone when he said, "Died on board the craft. Between that and Portia...I think it was just too much for Effie to take."

"Portia?" A tingling sensation stabbed through Peeta's fingertips from pressing his wrist into the handcuff, stopping his circulation. "What happened to her?"

"Take it you didn't see Snow's broadcast?" Peeta shook his head no. "She's gone boy. He killed her and your prep team on the air in retaliation for breaking the rest of them out."

Peeta let his head fall back against the mattress. "Sorry, Cinna," he whispered, remembering how much the man had sacrificed to keep Portia alive.

"Geez," Haymitch exclaimed. "What the hell is it with you two?"

"Who?" Peeta was taken aback by Haymitch's outburst.

"You and Effie. Ya gotta take the blame for everything that happens in this war? It's a freaking war! People die!" Haymitch threw up his hands. "You two need to knock this shit off. This shit didn't start until she started blaming herself for..." he ran a hand down his red face, "...Geez...come on Trinkie." Haymitch pressed the palms of his hands against the cold glass that separated them from Effie. "Wake up...say something."

"She's going to be all right, Haymitch." Peeta placed his bandaged hand on his mentor's arm. "This is Effie we're talking about."

"Yeah...sure kid," he looked down at the white gauze. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Got into a fight with an elevator." Peeta ducked his head down.

"Taking on heavy machinery instead of old boyfriends now?" Haymitch gave him a cocky grin and noticed Peeta's grimace. "Come on, you're not still harping on about that shit are you? I told you kid," he pointed a finger at Peeta, "there was never anything going on between those two. You really want to screw your life up? Keep making accusations about Ga..."

"PEETA!"

"Speak of the devil," Haymitch murmured under his breath then gave Peeta a warning. "Be nice, kid. He helped save Effie."

"Something's wrong," Peeta sat upright when he saw Gale sprinting towards them. "Katniss should be with him." Peeta looked past Gale for her and saw no one. "Take these cuffs off," his voice started shaking when he addressed his guard. "Hurry!"

"PEETA! COME QUICK!" Gale screamed from twenty to thirty yards away.

"Hurry up!" Peeta yelled at the guard who was fumbling with the key. "Let's go," he waved the guy on as he caught up to Gale. "Where's Katniss?"

"You've got to hurry. She's in with one of the doctors, but they don't know what to do...they need authorization for something, and I tried to tell them to save her, but...I'm not related to her, and her mom's in surgery with Johanna. Your dad went to get Prim, but I knew you were closer," Gale sounded winded as he rattled on. His feet pounding at the hard hospital floor. "Peeta, they think she's still pregnant."

"That's because she is," he said to a surprised Gale. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know. Finnick and Annie saw her collapse."

The rapid pace of his heart matched his racing feet. "Katniss," Peeta busted through the hospital door into her room. "Oh geez...Katniss," he kept swallowing over and over again. "What's happening? What's wrong with her?"

"Your wife's blood pressure is skyrocketing, and we can bring it down, but the medication we'd use may cause severe damage to your child."

"Explain, severe damage," Peeta tried to keep his eyes focused on the doctor and not Katniss with tubes sticking out of her arms, an oxygen mask pulled over her nose and mouth.

"It can range from...minor issues to more severe..."

"Don't give me your bullshit answers!" Peeta snapped and the doctor took a step back. "What are we talking about here!? Death? Brain damage? Birth defects?"

The doctor blew out a tiny breath and said, "Well...yes. All three are possible."

"And you mean to say there's nothing you can do to help her without hurting the baby?" Peeta didn't believe it for a second. "Where's Regina?"

"I'm afraid Dr. Valero is in surgery right now and is unable to..."

"Is she able to consult from surgery?" Peeta interrupted the doctor.

"Dr. Valero will tell you the same thing I..."

He cut him off again, "That's not what I asked! I asked if she can consult from surgery," Peeta snapped.

"Mr. Mellark, we're wasting precious time. The longer your wife's pressure is up, the more chance she has of stroking out."

"You mean...she can have a stroke?" Gale asked in disbelief. "That's ridiculous. She's too young for that."

"Not when her pressure is up so high." The doctor faced Peeta. "We need an answer Mr. Mellark. Do we treat your wife or don't we?"

"I...I don't know," Peeta's mouth was getting dry. His head felt like it was spinning out of control. A week, they had been together for a week, and Peeta was still at a loss when it came to this woman everyone called his wife.

"Give her the drugs," Gale said with certainty.

"Is that what we should do, Mr. Mellark?" The doctor waited for confirmation.

"I..." he glanced at Gale who gave him a nod, "...guess."

"Guessing will not do. We need a yes or a no."

"Then...um..." An image of Katniss jumping into an ocean as the golden Cornucopia was being invaded by Careers entered Peeta's mind. "No." He lifted his eyes to the doctor. "No. Don't put anything in her system that Dr. Valero, Katniss' mother or Prim hasn't approved."

"Peeta," Gale gasped, "what the hell are you doing? She could die."

"Gale, what do you think will happen if she wakes up and finds out the baby died? You think she'll want to live? Because I don't." Peeta said harshly. "Katniss would rather risk her life than hurt the baby. This is my wife. My family and I think Katniss would want you to wait." Peeta walked to the edge of her hospital bed, willing her to wake up. "My suggestion would be for you to send someone to the operating room to talk to Regina. In the meantime, we'll wait for Prim to show up. She might know about a natural remedy that you doctors don't."

"Mr. Mellark..."

The lecturing tone in the doctor's voice had Peeta barking, "I told you what we're going to do. Now do it." He waited until the physician ordered a nurse to go to surgery then asked Gale to tag along. "Not that I don't trust them, but..." Peeta spoke softly to Gale, "...I don't trust them." He didn't really trust Gale either, but Katniss did, and that's all that mattered.

There were a lot of questions written all over Gale's face, but he didn't argue. He simply followed Peeta's request, "I'll let you know what the doctor says."

Peeta's security detail was standing just outside the door; a doctor was explaining everything to Plutarch in the waiting area while a nurse monitored Katniss and the baby's vital signs. "Your daughter's heart rate has been holding strong since we administered the last dosage of blood pressure medication," the nurse spoke quietly to Peeta.

"Was it safe to use?"

"Yes," she adjusted something on the machine the tubes were hooked up to.

"Then why is he talking about drugs that will cause harm to the baby?" Peeta moved closer to the nurse, who lifted her eyes towards the door to make sure no one was listening. "Mr. Mellark, she has another option. The drugs that were given won't work as quickly which puts your wife in danger of having a stroke, but her pressure *is* dropping at a slow and steady rate," the nurse whispered.

Peeta glared out the window where the physician stood with Plutarch. "This medicine they wanted to give to her, could it have caused a miscarriage?"

"Yes," the nurse answered quietly. "Good thing her friend was here with her and stopped the doctors from administering anymore medication considering you don't want treatment for her. Personally, I think you made the right call, but please don't tell them I said that," the slight tremor in her voice left Peeta wondering what was going on in the hospital of Thirteen, and if Coin was still trying to put an end to the pregnancy.

He lifted Katniss' hand to his lips, placed a kiss on her knuckles and said, "Don't worry. I won't let anyone hurt banana nut...or you." Peeta watched for almost an hour through the glass window as Evelyn was joined by his father and Prim. He had no idea if his mother in law was yelling at the doctor, but from the expression on her face, Peeta knew where Katniss got her temper. It came as a surprise to him to see the woman, who was normally so mild mannered, up in arms. "Your mom's got this covered, Katniss," he leaned his head close to hers. "You never told me that's where you got your feistiness from."

"That's because I never knew," Katniss' eyes drifted open. "Hey," she whispered.

"Hey," he placed a kiss against the back of her hand. "You gave us a scare there."

"Is the baby okay?"

"Maysilee is fine," he turned his chair to face her. "How are you?"

"My head is throbbing," she lifted her fingers to her temple. "It's been bothering me all day."

"That's from your blood pressure," the nurse spoke to them as she removed the oxygen mask from Katniss and replaced it with a pair of tiny tubes up her nostrils. "Headaches are a telling sign as well as swelling of the feet and hands..." the nurse began rattling off different symptoms, and telling Katniss that she'd probably be admitted into the hospital until the situation was resolved. "I'll leave you two to talk before that group comes in here," her eyes flashed out the window.

Katniss let out a soft sigh, "How's Effie?"

"Don't know," Peeta noticed her flinch when he ran the back of her hand against his cheek. "I shouldn't be doing that, right? You're mad at me," his depressed tone might as well have asked if she thought this was his fault. "Katniss, I'm not sure if we should talk now or wait...or..."

"Just answer one question for me," she held his gaze. "How much of that interview was an act?"

"None of it," he answered honestly.

"Then why did Plutarch feed you information?"

"Because he wanted to make sure I didn't tell the nation about my memory loss." He rested his elbows against his knees. "Before we went on air he handed me the earpiece and told me to put it in. When I asked him why, he told me he wanted to make sure I didn't say anything on air that would be considered treasonous again." He gave his shoulder a shrug. "I figured...better safe than sorry, right? Just as you began your story, Plutarch started rambling in my ear about how I should reassure the nation...tell them how much I love you...prove I'm devoted to you...but then I heard you talking about the elevator in Twelve, and I remembered holding your hand in there," he softly grinned. "How the palms of your hands...the tips of your fingers were a little calloused, but the tops...your wrist...your skin was so soft. You were so nervous while we were in there...I was petrified..." a tender smile blossomed across his face.

"You...remembered all of that?" A hint of surprise in her voice.

"Yeah, came as a shock to me too, so when you finished talking I pretty much ignored Plutarch's orders and did what felt right, plus...I wasn't crazy about the thought of lying to the country about something like this. Just didn't seem like the right thing to do."

"So what did he say after that?"

"Once I let it out that I didn't remember marrying you, he started making suggestions to me about things to say to you." Peeta gave her a sheepish look, "He asked me if I had discovered anything about you since coming to Thirteen...what they were..."

Katniss gave her head a tilt, "That's why you said those things to me, about the way I smelled...my temper?"

"He asked what qualities I liked in you, and I answered." Peeta looked down at the ground. "I should have figured out what to say on my own, like you did."

She curled a section of his hair around the tip of her finger. "Truthfully, it was your, 'real or not real,' question that gave me the idea of what to talk about today, otherwise I would've just answered Cressida's questions. Like you answered Plutarch's." She gave his sleeve a little tug. "Look at me." He slowly lifted his concerned blue gaze to her reassuring silver eyes. "How did the date come up?"

"Plutarch said, 'wouldn't it be lovely if you asked her on a date,' and...I want you to know I had already made the decision to do that while you were still telling your story, but I didn't want to do it on camera, and with everything that was going on today...guess I didn't think it was a good time, but then Plutarch made the suggestion and I thought, why not take a chance? Maybe it wasn't...no," he took responsibility for what he did, "It definitely wasn't fair to put you on the spot like that. Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought maybe you'd turn me down, and if I asked you while we were on air, you wouldn't say no." He paused for a second then said, "I'm sorry I took advantage of the situation...of you."

Her normally unreadable face turned soft. "Don't do it again, okay."

"Okay." They held each other's gazes. "Know what I keep thinking about?" He asked.

"What?"

"Finnick and Annie. Seeing the two of them today...all I kept thinking was how lucky they were...are." He looked over his shoulder towards the group of people that was gradually thinning out then back at Katniss. "Today has been one of the worst days of my life."

"Peeta, we were in the Games. You were tortured by Snow for weeks. What can be worse than that?"

"The thought of losing you...the baby. It scared the hell out of me. I'm still scared."

"Me too," Katniss admitted.

"When I came in here and saw you lying there, all I could think of was how much we've missed out on...how much of our life together had been wiped away. Then I think about those two running into each other's arms..." He let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm not jealous of Finnick and Annie, but I am...envious."

"It's understandable. You want your life back." Katniss stared up at the ceiling. "I do too. I just don't know how to go about doing it."

"Katniss? Did you mean it when you said we were over?" Peeta had been worried about it since she had said it.

"I tried to mean it," she said with sorrow in her voice. "Then you didn't show up in Special Weaponry, and I knew something had happened to you...and our fight didn't seem to matter anymore."

"We can't keep doing this, Katniss. Going back and forth like this is hurting you and Maysilee. We've got to..."

"Peeta," she interrupted him. "That's the second time now you've used the baby's name," a tender smile lifted at the corner of her lips.

He let out a little laugh. "Gosh, I didn't even..." he smiled at her. "I remembered her name."

"That's a good thing, don't you think?"

He nodded. "Yeah. A really good thing."

"I've got an idea," she adjusted herself in the bed. "What do you say we try something new?"

"New?" A little twinkle sparkled in his eyes. "What do you have in mind?"

"We keep trying to go back to being husband and wife...dating," hope gleamed across her face. "What do you say we start at the very beginning?"

"Isn't that what the dates are for?"

"Sure, but what if we don't go into the dates with the expectation of rediscovering a husband...a wife. What if we simply go into them looking for a friend?"

"You want to be my...friend? Like...Gale is your friend?" He narrowed his stare.

"No...well...yes, but not like the friendship I have with Gale. I'm talking about the friendship I had with you." He couldn't seem to pull his gaze away from her or the sheer glow that shimmered in her eyes. "It

dawned on me that the thing I missed more than anything between you and I was our friendship. You were my best friend Peeta. I confided in you...told you things I never told anyone else, including Gale, which pissed him off." She let out a little chuckle. "I finally realized today that the reason Gale has been so jealous of you was because I shared more with you than I ever did with him, and the reason you used to be so jealous of him?" her brow arched. "Because you thought he knew more about me than you did. Can I just take this opportunity to say...boys suck?"

Peeta let out a laugh. "Noted."

"Good."

The tip of his tongue darted out, moistening his dry lips. "Friends, huh?"

"It's how we started off. We didn't just hop into a boyfriend/girlfriend thing. Hell, it took you a week to hold my hand again after that first day in the elevator, and our first hug didn't happen until weeks after that. Of course that was kind of a combination...hug...kiss thing."

"It took me weeks to kiss you?" That didn't sound like him. He remembered a couple of the other girls he had kissed, and he didn't wait weeks to do it.

"Actually, our first real kiss didn't happen for...wow," Katniss stopped to think. "Peeta, we must've been dating for almost six months before I kissed you on reaping day."

"Wait a minute!" His brows shot up. "*You* kissed *me*?"

"Yes," she said proudly. "I was the first to hug you too."

"Okay...can you explain this whole...hug/kiss thing we did?" His curiosity had been peaked.

"I can, but I think we should wait a while."

"Why?" He was disappointed.

"Because they're coming in to talk to us." About three seconds later her room door opened, and their family walked in sans the doctor that was covering for Regina.

Peeta let Prim take his seat, rested against the counter with his father, and took notice of Gale standing outside, waiting patiently. "Mom, before you get into this, give me a second." Peeta knocked on the window and motioned for Gale to come in. "I'm assuming this is okay with you, Katniss."

"It's fine," she mouthed, "thank you," at Peeta then gave Gale a smile. "Guess you know I'm still pregnant," she said across a crowded room to him.

"When Snow mentioned your daughter on television today, I just figured he didn't know you had a miscarriage. It didn't faze me that he never called your baby a boy." Gale took a step closer to her. "You could have told me, Catnip. I would've kept your secret."

"No, I couldn't. I'm sorry; Gale, but I just couldn't take the chance."

Gale gave his head a little shake, "Anemia. Who came up with that?" He gave Prim a teasing stare. "As if I have to ask."

"Brilliance runs in our family," Prim said proudly.

Each of them took time to worry, to let the situation eat away at them, but ultimately more tests would need to be run, and everyone agreed

they should wait for Dr. Valero to get out of surgery to run them. Though everyone wondered why the physician wanted to give Katniss a medication that could harm the baby, neither Peeta nor Katniss voiced their suspicions. Peeta thought about the meeting he had with Coin earlier in the day, and the threat he made towards her, and wondered if this was her way of sending him some sort of message that she was ultimately in charge and could kill his daughter, making it seem like an accident. Katniss wondered if Coin was still trying to get the most out of her Mockingjay, but couldn't because she was still pregnant. It had been a long day, and it would be an even longer night waiting for the arrival of Regina. Though they didn't say it, both Katniss and Peeta knew, they'd be facing the fear of losing their child together that night.

It was almost midnight when everyone left her room, her mother being the last. "Thanks mom. Goodnight," Katniss lifted her fingers in a small wave. "MOM!" She called as the door closed, and perked up when her mother peeked her head back in. "I forgot to ask, can I get something to eat? I'm starving. I passed out before I could eat any dinner."

Peeta let out a tiny laugh as his mother in law rolled her eyes at Katniss and smiled, but his good humor slowly turned into silent torment. He rested his head on the edge of Katniss' bed and let the tears drip onto her bed. "Katniss don't scare me like that again." He knew she had said they'd start off as friends, but at that moment, all he wanted to do was grab hold of her and kiss her.

"Shh," she ran a hand over the back of his downy curls. "Things will get better, Peeta. Just wait and see."

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Waiting for a diagnosis was driving Katniss and Peeta insane. It had been two days since she collapsed and they were still no closer to an answer than that very first night, but the expression on Regina's face when she entered that night told the expectant parents that she had finally found the source of Katniss' high blood pressure. "Believe it or not, you're having an allergic reaction to the fetus," Regina explained to them. "It's not very common, but it does happen."

"What do you mean; I'm having an allergic reaction?" Katniss' confusion was evident in her befuddled expression.

"Exactly that. You know how some people are allergic to...let's say, bee stings?" Katniss and Peeta both nodded. "You're allergic to the fetus, Katniss."

It had come as a shock to both of them to hear this, but Regina assured them that she'd be able to treat Katniss now that she knew the source of her ailment. The only problem was, Katniss wasn't responding to anything Regina tried, and staying in bed seemed to make her even worse, so Regina allowed Katniss limited mobility. Each day she was allowed to be wheeled into Effie's room for an hour long visit, and each afternoon she was brought outside to sit next to the oak tree and share a picnic with Peeta, where they started building their friendship from the ground up. Every day brought new challenges, Peeta's flashbacks being a major one, but once Beetee, Prim and the scientists of Thirteen developed, what they believed was an antidote, or as close to one as they'd get, things started to look a little brighter.

Peeta's first dose of medication wasn't planned, but when he had a flashback during training in Special Weaponry, Dr. Valero and Beetee agreed it was time to test it out on their subject. Within a few minutes of administering the drug to him, Peeta's anger had dissipated, and he felt almost normal. It was considered a great success. Everyone had been pleased with the outcome of the medication with the exception of Peeta.

"Guess I was hoping for some sort of miracle cure," he admitted to Katniss during their date that day under the oak tree. "Like, I'd finally get this drug they created, and..." he let his head sink down.

"Would it be horrible if I said, I'm almost glad it didn't restore all of your memories?" Katniss stared straight ahead waiting for him to say something. When he didn't she faced him and saw the pained expression plaguing his face. "I'm not saying I'm glad you get flashbacks or anything like that, I'm talking about the you and me part of it."

"You're going to have to explain that one to me, Katniss."

"For the past week we've been coming out here, learning things about each other..."

"You mean I've been learning about us," He corrected her.

"No, I mean...we've been learning about each other." She sat with her back against the tree, and her knees bent. "In all the time I've known you, you've barely told me a thing about your brothers, and this past week that's all you've talked about." Katniss grinned. "I like getting to know them."

"I only wish you had the chance when they were alive," Peeta said regretfully.

"That's the thing," she turned her body towards him, "I did have the chance, but I let my hate for your mother stand in my way of getting to know them...of you getting to spend time with them." She felt horrible about that. "Makes me wish I could..."

"Stop right there," Peeta lifted a finger to cover her lips. "I'm so sick of us saying, 'I wish,' or, 'what if,' 'if only I had...' I'm sick of it, Katniss, and I'm one of the worst offenders. I say shi...crap like that so often, they've become vocabulary staples."

Katniss let out a chuckle. "Peeta, you might not think those shots are working, but they are."

"How do you know they are?" He wondered how they had gotten off topic so quickly.

"Because you stopped yourself from saying shit," Katniss rested her head against his shoulder. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah," he said about her new sitting position, enjoying how they were slowly becoming comfortable with one another again. "What's the big deal about me stopping myself from swearing?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but you've been saying things like bullshit, damn it, bitch, whore..." She lifted her eyes to his, "...need me to go on?"

"No," he said behind a blush.

"The guy I knew rarely said things like that. In fact the only time I ever heard you say something, other than damn or hell, was when you were baking or painting after you injured your hand. You'd get so pissed off if you dropped something that you'd let out a string of curse words that would make Haymitch blush."

"Well that's good to know," he said with a chuckle. "Can't say that I've been too proud of some of the words that have come out of me as of late."

"Well, that's all going to change pretty soon," Katniss attempted to sound encouraging, not her strong suit. "You'll get better before you know it."

"And if I don't?"

She lifted her eyes to his and said, "Then we learn to live with it, and we'll make a bunch of new memories so you won't have to remember."

Peeta wrapped both arms around her and gave her a squeeze.
"Thanks, Katniss."

"For what?"

He rested his head against hers and said, "For being my friend."

The time they spent together was no longer filled with the pressure of expectation, but the thrill of anticipation. Peeta found himself truly enjoying his newfound friendship with Katniss, and Katniss found that she was falling in love with a whole new side of Peeta. The camera crew filmed them every other day as promised, and somehow Plutarch and his team were able to piece together propos that made them look and sound like their bond had never been broken. Admittedly, Finnick had also been the star of many propos. Now that Annie was back, he was able to concentrate on the rebellion and was ready, willing and able to help in any way he could. Both Katniss and Peeta were grateful considering they were still battling Katniss' adverse reaction to carrying their daughter, and they were now down to the last option Regina had proposed to them, other than keeping Katniss in bed for the remainder of her pregnancy.

The blank sketchpad sat on Peeta's thighs, its off white pages begging for hints of color to be added. His guard was posted outside of his hospital room door preventing him from leaving the room and going next door in the wee hours of the morning to visit Katniss regardless of how much he wanted to.

Things had been progressing nicely between them. Fighting had become a thing of the past. Neither one of them wanted to get her blood pressure up, and the special diet she had been put on, though Katniss thought it was bland, seemed to be helping her. She was now in her second trimester of the pregnancy, almost fifteen weeks along, but the baby still wasn't out of the woods, and Katniss wasn't sure if she'd survive till her due date that winter.

The scraping sound of metal against metal had Peeta's eyes peeling around the room, asking himself if this was real or not. "Geez! Katniss," he whispered loudly when he saw her familiar bare feet sticking out of the vent, climbing their way down his hospital wall. "What the hell are you doing?" He rushed to her aid and guided her down to the steel table below.

"Hey," she flashed him a hint of a smile from atop the table. "Think you can bring that chair over here so I can climb down?"

"For Christ sake," he grumbled as he took her in his arms and carried her across his room. "You're going to catch a cold if you walk around this place with no slippers on." He sat her on the edge of his bed. "What the hell are you thinking climbing through that thing in your condition?"

"I needed to talk to you, and your guard wouldn't let me in," she said quietly not wanting to be discovered.

"And it couldn't wait till morning?" He took up a spot next to her.

"Not really." Her hand automatically reached for his, a habit they had picked up again over the past couple of weeks. "Peeta, I know we said we'd be friends, but..." her insides were quaking, "...I really need my husband tonight."

She didn't have to say why. He already knew. "Banana nut?"

"Yeah," she sniffed, trying her best not to cry.

"It's funny, I've been sitting here thinking, I really need to face this with my wife." Their eyes met and Katniss' shoulders began to quake. "Oh, Katniss," he pulled her into his arms. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

"How Peeta? How will this be fine?" She wasn't arguing with him, she was desperate to have him ease her greatest fears. "I'm allergic to my own baby."

"Regina's pretty confident that this next treatment will work." Peeta didn't bother saying that the doctor was pretty confident that all of the prior ones would work too, Katniss already knew.

"She said it *may* help." Katniss wrapped her arms around his neck and cried into his shoulder. "Peeta, what are we going to do if I don't respond to it? What's going to happen if...if...God, Peeta, if I lose this baby because of my own body chemistry..." sounds of her tears grew louder, and Peeta worried that someone may come in and make Katniss leave.

The rules that had been instituted were simple. They could spend time together during the day as long as there was a guard present, but once it was time for bed, Katniss had to keep her distance. Peeta's violent outbursts could flare up at any given time, but nighttime was always the worst. He had absolutely no control over himself once

darkness consumed his hospital room. Once there were only nightmares to worry about, now Peeta's nightmares carried over into his waking hours. Katniss had no idea that Peeta was the one that had instituted the rule, but she didn't need to know. Peeta was terrified that if she found out, she'd try to talk him into bending them, and that was something he couldn't afford to do. If for some reason he lashed out in his sleep, he could seriously injure Katniss and their baby, so he chose to keep her at arm's length during their sleeping hours. If it had been any other night, Peeta probably would have made her leave, but tonight he just didn't have it in him to be so cruel. He wondered what he would do to help her through this if he had never been hijacked. 'You're not going to help her with I wishes and what if's,' he thought to himself. 'Do something now to help her. Be her husband, if only for tonight.' He brushed his thumbs underneath her bloodshot eyes to wipe away the tears and lifted her off the bed, carrying her to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" She asked when he turned the shower on.

"The only thing I can think of," he pulled the t-shirt he was wearing over his head and tossed it onto the floor, "we're going to talk this out like we did when we were Mr. and Mrs. Mellark, and you said we always started with a shower, so..." he gave his shoulder a little shrug. "What do you say?"

"I'm not wearing a bra."

"Neither am I," tiny bursts of laughter echoed through the restroom at statement. "Promise I won't look."

"I don't have my shampoo." She unbuttoned the top button of his oversized pajama shirt which came down to her thighs.

"That's okay, I have it." Peeta wanted to smile when he noticed that she had chosen the matching shirt to the pants he was wearing for bed that night.

"You do?" She turned her back to him and covered her bare chest with her arm.

"They brought all my stuff from my last hospital room in here, and your shampoo was in the bathroom." Peeta didn't want to admit it to her, but he had spent many a night sniffing at the bottle remembering that very first night he had come to Thirteen. He tossed his pants on top of his discarded shirt, leaving his boxers on. "I'll go in first, so I can face away from you, okay?"

"Okay," Katniss had no clue where the feelings of shyness were coming from, but they were there and almost as prominent as their wedding night. "Are you in?"

"Yeah," he sputtered when some water shot in his face. "These things stay on all the time in the hospital, right?"

"The showers? Yeah," Katniss stepped in and turned her back to his. "Okay." She threw her hair over her shoulders and let it cascade down her spine.

"Take a couple of steps backwards," he directed her until the water drenched her hair. "It's longer," he said absently.

"What is?"

"Your hair. It's grown a lot in the past few months." He poured out a blob of shampoo onto his hand and began massaging it into her scalp.

"How do you know? You don't remember me...remember?" She let out a small giggle.

"It's funny how I can recall certain things, like..." he smiled to himself, "...your freckles, the sound of your laugh, how you like your hair braided, but I couldn't tell you what your favorite color was if my life depended on it."

"Green. Mine's green and yours is orange." Katniss let her hands drop to her sides and enjoyed the feeling of his fingers running through her hair. "Mmmm, that feels so good. It's so relaxing."

"Yeah?" Peeta felt a tiny surge of pride shoot through him knowing he had the ability to bring her comfort when she really needed it. "You should try my back massages some time. Now those are really something to talk about," he joked, then blushed when he heard her comment.

"Oh, I've had the full body massage, and I must say...all those years of kneading dough have certainly paid off, Mellark."

They didn't spend too much time in the shower, just enough for Peeta to wash her hair, and Katniss to wash his. They dried off facing away from each other, though Katniss did sneak a peek in the mirror at one point, and almost let out a groan when she realized how much she missed being married. She pulled on a pair of Peeta's pajama pants and pulled the drawstring as tight as she could, but she was still swimming in them. When they climbed into bed together, the pants fell to her feet causing a nervous bout of laughter to come from both of them.

"Want me to try and find a hospital gown?" Peeta asked. "I'm sure there's one in here somewhere." She'd still be practically nude, but the gown would cover much more of her than his pajama shirt.

"No," she tugged the pants back up and gripped them at the waist while taking a spot next to him on the small hospital bed. "These will be fine, and if I get tangled up in them, I'll just take them off." She didn't have to look to know that he was blushing. She rolled onto her side to face him, a flood of memories swept through her as they took up their familiar pose. Their torsos were touching, but her chest was pulled away from his, and their legs were sticking straight out.

"This is kind of awkward, isn't it?"

"A little," the heat from his breath warmed her chilly cheeks.

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to Katniss." The last thing he wanted was for her to feel uncomfortable with him, or think that he was trying to force her into anything.

"No. I want to," her silver eyes glowed in the dark. "I just know you're probably not comfortable with me being in bed with you so..." she turned her face into the pillow trying her best to keep her heart steady.

"I'm comfortable. Maybe a little too much," he admitted. Holding her in his arms, having her face less than an inch away from his and the scent of her hair ignited his senses.

"Peeta," she forgot about their compromising position and spilled out her fears. "I'm so scared."

"Me too," he ran his hand down the back of her damp head.

"If this doesn't work tomorrow...there's nothing more the doctors can do."

"You can do something though," he reminded her. "Stay on bed rest and take care of yourself. Take care of our banana nut."

Katniss wrapped her arm around his neck, turned her face into his, and brushed the tip of her nose against his smooth cheek. "If that's what it takes, I'll do it. I won't like it, but I'll do it."

The thudding of his heart reverberated through his ears. "Sometimes I wonder what this world expects from us...why the universe keeps throwing us curveballs." He tucked his leg between hers, and felt her knee rub against his hip. "I watch some of these people around here, in the dining hall, and see them sitting round a dinner table, sharing their nightly meal, and I know that when they're through, they'll take their kids up to their quarters, bathe them...tuck them in for the night. I wonder, do they sing them a lullaby...read to them...tell their children stories of faraway lands and mystery." He released a warm breath against her ear. "And I wonder if they know how lucky they are to be able to live such a mundane...normal life."

"The only good thing about being in the hospital for me is not having to eat in the dining hall. I hate all of those people," Katniss told him. "I honestly can't stand them, and they've done nothing to me..." she admitted something to him she was certain he had already figured out, "...I just don't like...people."

"Sure you do," he ran a hand over her back.

"No, Peeta," she lifted her face a bit, her fingers dug into his arms, accentuating her point. "I think most people suck."

"Some do, but not all, Katniss," he said with a troubled expression. "You and I have met some really good people in the worst places. People that are willing...have already, given up their lives for you and me."

"I told you..." she tucked her head under his chin, "...*most* people suck. There are exceptions, but they're a rarity."

Peeta studied the darkness, thinking about the friends he had made, the impact people from the Capitol of all places, had made on his life. "I believe," his voice was tranquil and melodic, "that the majority of people in this world have decent souls. That we all share a commonality called kindness...compassion only...we live in a world where showing that side of you is considered a weakness." He met her inquisitive gaze, stroked her cheek with the palm of his hand then cradled it. "When you live in a world that demands everything from you, and gives you nothing in return, you have no choice but to build up a wall of defense in order to protect yourself...to protect the ones you love. You can't blame people for living that way, but you can blame those that take advantage of the situation." The image of a Peacekeeper entered his mind. "I remember one night...must've been a couple of months after we started dating...it was one of those bitter cold evenings where the wind smacked you in the face the second you stepped outside and took your breath away. My dad was getting rid of the trash, we had a big delivery that morning and needed to rip down the boxes, and I decided to give him a hand." Peeta could almost see the dumpster that they piled the larger trash items into sitting against the stone wall by the back of their bakery...feel the cold biting into his flesh...smell the snow that had covered District Twelve like a white fluffy blanket. "One of the boxes got caught up in the wind, so I chased after it, and it smacked into the leg of Harmony Mulligan. I remember looking up at her when I reached for the piece of cardboard and thinking, why is Harmony standing in the middle of town when all the businesses were closed for the day," he swallowed the huge lump in his throat. "That's when I saw them...the girls. They were all gathered around the outside of the Head's door. Some had coats on, but most of them were wearing scraps of thin material, clutching it to their chest, trying to prevent the cold from tearing through their flesh, and all of them were waiting to see if they'd be Cray's chosen one for the night." The sight of teenage girls to grown women had been

nothing new to Peeta. Everyone knew what the Head Peacekeeper did around there, but no one ever said a thing. "When I saw Harmony standing there like a sheep waiting to be slaughtered, my heart broke." The memory brought a sharp pain to his chest. "I just looked into her eyes and I could see her fear...her shame. What kind of man would prey on someone so innocent?" He said more to himself than Katniss. "That's when Cray opened the door and all these women...girls," his voice cracked when he said it, "who had been slouching...huddling together to keep warm, stood upright...like they were on display in one of our bakery cases." The same feeling of anger he had when Cray eyed him up, simmered in the bowels of Peeta's belly. "Cray noticed me standing there and said, 'I don't like boys son,' then laughed it off like he had made the funniest joke in the world, but me...I couldn't move. Cray starts yelling at me, telling me to shoo...go back to the bakery before he called for reinforcements, and that's when my dad showed up. He put his hands on my shoulder and said, 'Sorry sir. The boy and his classmate here were just trying to catch some trash that blew into your front yard.' Then my dad took Harmony by the wrist and whispered to her, 'Just walk away.'" Tears started to drip down Peeta's cheeks. "You know what he did Katniss?" She shook her head back and forth. "He brought her into the bakery and said, 'You need food, money or both?' and Harmony was shaking like a leaf, she probably didn't know what to expect. My dad...he bagged up three loaves of bread, took a huge hunk of dough he had in our cooler and said to her, 'Keep that cold...at least overnight...it's good for up to a week. All you have to do is take a little ball of it, roll it up and let it get bigger...about a half hour or so, then bake it for ten minutes. You'll have fresh rolls all week if you're careful with it.' Then he pulled out what little coins he had in his pocket and pressed them into her palm, threw his jacket over her shoulders and told me to walk her straight home. I knew it was so Cray wouldn't stop her...the way he was licking his lips when he looked at her standing next to me

turned my stomach." He remembered the path he had taken through the Seam back home, and from nowhere he could see her...Katniss. Peeta's throat felt like it was closing up on him as he sniffed. "I could see you and Prim in your bedroom...framed in the window like a work of art. I just looked up at the two of you and I swear Katniss, I almost cried. That could have been you out there...Prim..." The same sickening feeling bubbled in his belly. "I just kept thinking how cruel Cray was...how he deserved a taste of his own medicine, but then you turned and looked out the window...right down at me," Peeta wiped a finger under his nose to stop it from running. "You held up a finger, like you wanted me to stay there..."

Katniss remembered that night. "I wondered what you were doing looking up at me. I thought maybe your mom had hurt you."

"No," Peeta placed a kiss against her forehead. "When you came out of your house a few minutes later carrying a small bag of trash, I knew you had made an excuse so you could come out to see me."

"You felt like ice when I hugged you." She could almost see his bright red nose and the flakes of snow that had landed in his hair.

"You felt like a warm bath on a snowy evening," he trailed his lips over her forehead. "I hated Cray more than I've ever hated anyone in my life that night, but then my dad helped Harmony and all that hate melted away. My dad, he taught me that anyone could make a difference in someone's life, just by showing kindness." Peeta heard a tiny snuffle come from Katniss and looked down at her. "You okay?"

"No," she clung to him with both hands, pulling him as close to her as possible. "Peeta...I'm not a nice person."

"Oh, Katniss..." his consoling tone tried to reassure her, "...don't say that about yourself."

"I'm not" she insisted. "I would have never done anything like your dad did. I probably would've thought, how the Capitol should be burned to the ground for putting a girl that young in such a position, but I wouldn't have stopped to help her."

"You weren't in a position to. My dad was."

"You're wrong, Peeta. I could always have shot an extra squirrel or two, but if I gave it to one..." Katniss hated herself for her way of thinking back then.

"You'd give the shirt off your back to someone in need Katniss."

"How do you know that?" She pushed against his chest with both palms. "You don't remember me."

She had made an excellent point. "Maybe I don't remember most of our time together, but that doesn't mean I don't know you...know who you are now." He cupped her cheeks, brushed the pads of his thumbs beneath her eyes and said, "I know you," so softly the whisper of his breath gently fluttered against her skin. "I've seen the way you stand up for people...like Octavia. She may have been from the Capitol, but out here...she's lost, and you help her all the time. You're stuck in a hospital, yet you still make sure you go to Effie's room every day and try and help her get past the things that put her in such a state. The Capitol...they're your enemy, yet when you saw the diagram for the bombs that Gale and Beetee had been working on yesterday you questioned them about it. Why Katniss? Why?"

"Because..." she had barely even given it another thought after leaving Special Weaponry the day before. She was only there so Beetee could do a quick scan of her body for some adjustments he was making to her uniform, but when she walked in, she saw him and Gale hovered over some crude sketches of a bomb that, once it went

off, would take out small prey. When others went in to help the wounded, the larger bomb...the one that was filled with something Katniss had yet to figure out, went off taking out the major targets. "What they're designing doesn't seem...it's cruel. Like they're crossing some sort of moral line."

"My point exactly." He gave her a reassuring smile. "Those people are supposed to be your enemies, yet you'd rather they not die such a horrific death. What did you do when you saw the pieces of paper they had thrown onto the ground?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "You gathered a few of them up for me so I could try to piece it together and see what they were up to, and now we have an idea of it, don't we?"

"Yeah," she nodded, still somewhat taken aback by Gale's response when she questioned the bomb's design.

"Don't you think this is a bit...too much?"

"I'm not doing anything Snow didn't do when he hijacked Peeta, or tortured Johanna...killed Portia," how did she argue with Gale's reasoning when it made so much sense? Still, it bothered her that killing the innocent came so easily for him.

"Yes," Beetee stated with a look in his eyes that reminded Katniss of the boy she saw in the arena during his Games when he watched the Careers squirming on the ground from the electrical trap he had set for them. "He's thinking like his enemy, and preying on his weaknesses," he gave Gale a rap on the shoulder as though he were a chip off the old block.

"You may not believe this Katniss, but I'm very well aware of who you are...of how you act towards people, and..." he grinned a little, "...I like it. The way I see it, you say what most people are afraid to, and I find that kind of truthfulness refreshing."

It always amazed her that he saw her bad attitude as an attribute. "You weren't saying that when you first got here," she said timidly, afraid that maybe he was being polite to her and saying what she wanted to hear.

"When I first got here I didn't know you, but I think we've come a long way this past month or so, don't you?"

She nodded, "Yeah." The heat of his breath when he spoke caused a rash of goose pimples to break out across her skin.

Two sets of eyes met as hearts stirred. They had spent weeks getting to know each other again...forming a friendship that had always been the base of their relationship. Both petrified to risk jumping back into love, afraid to trust the unseen emotion that could bring them to their knees or send their hearts soaring up to the sky. The space between them closed. His fingers trailed a path up her arm, his arm wrapped around her back. Her fingers played with the ends of his hair, her nose brushed back and forth against his. Their slightly parted lips began brushing against the other's cheek...chin...

There's a big difference between want and need. As much as Peeta wanted to kiss her, he needed something more from her. "Katniss," he choked out, "I can't do this."

"Why not?" She whispered into his ear and placed a soft kiss against his cheek. "Don't you want to kiss me, Peeta?" Her voice screamed of desperation. She could feel his heart drumming...hear his loud gulp. "I know I'm not perfect, Peeta...I complain all the time. I'm mean, but..." she couldn't seem to steady the trembling in her voice, "...Peeta, I lo..."

"Don't," he put his finger over her mouth. "I know what you want to say to me, and Katniss I don't want you to."

"Why?" She cried.

"You love the man you married, and I'm not that man anymore." An uncontrollable churning started in his gut. "I want to kiss you, but I can't. Not yet." He pressed his forehead against hers and tried to get her to understand where he was coming from. "I know we said we'd be husband and wife for tonight, but once I kiss you...I'm never going to want to go back to being your friend. I'm going to want so much more from you, and I need to know that when you kiss me back...you're kissing me, not the idea of the guy you married. That you're going to accept me for who I am now, not who I used to be and I don't think you can honestly say that's who you want to kiss right now."

Her bottom lip began to quiver from his realization. "You're not that different," she tried to reason.

"Aren't I?" he tilted his head to the side in question. "Can you honestly tell me that you're in bed with the same guy you said, I do, to?" Her eyes flashed away for a second. "The last time I kissed you, I let myself get carried away in the moment, and I can't make that same mistake, Katniss." She gave him a slow and careful nod. He hated to suggest it, but he really had no choice. "It's late," he whispered against her cheek. "You should probably head back to your room."

Disappointment lingered in her spirit. It was her own fault for trying to rush things with him when he clearly hadn't been ready to move onto the next level, but that didn't mean his turning her away didn't hurt. Katniss threw her legs over the side of the bed, held onto the oversized pajama pants so they wouldn't fall around her feet, and quietly said, "Thanks for tonight. I feel a lot better than I did when I came in here."

Peeta didn't believe it for a minute. "Katniss..." he sat up as she shuffled dejectedly towards the door. "Our next kiss...that's going to be the one that really counts." He took a careful step towards her. "The one that says, I want more. I'm willing to take a chance..." he continued when she looked back over her shoulder towards him, "I'm willing to be big enough to say, I'm able to forgive and forget...to not place blame...to overlook the little things and see the bigger picture, and not because we're having a baby, but because we...you and me..." he closed the gap between them, "...we're not afraid anymore." He looked deeply into her eyes, and tried to tell her where he was at that moment, and where he needed her to be, "That kiss...that's going to be the one that wipes away the pain and makes a promise for an unknown future."

"No," she gave him a delayed response to his question. "You're not the same...neither am I, so I guess...guess you're going to have to accept me for who I am now too." She inhaled through her nose, taking in his clean scent from his spot less than a yard away. "But you're wrong about one thing," she lifted her eyes to his, "I know you too, Peeta. Know who you were...who you are now, and even if I didn't know you before...I'd still feel this way. Not just because we said we'd pretend to be husband and wife for a night either, but because..." She remembered a moment of their life that had changed everything for her and turned the tables on Peeta. She held her hand out to him and said, "...I don't want to be just your friend anymore, Peeta." Utter surprise filled his eyes as they zipped back and forth between her gaze and her open palm. Katniss stood there waiting...waiting..."I promise I won't mention marriage unless you ask me to propose," she sucked in a breath and allowed the tears to pool in her eyes.

"I said that to you. Real or..." he swallowed the huge lump that had formed in his throat, "...or not real?"

"Real," she said between trembling lips.

His hand shot past hers, wrapped around the back of her neck, and pulled her lips to his. This is what he had been waiting for...acceptance. Not having to be something he wasn't...afraid of saying something wrong...swearing too much or not enough...flying off the handle...doing something stupid...something he would have never done in his previous life, and being forgiven without having to go through hell to get to that point.

The feeling of his hands clasping her cheeks, his mouth pressed against hers was like that first breath of air after being submerged under water. Life had been breathed back into her. Katniss' fingers dug into his shoulder blades, clutching him to her. "Peeta...Peeta," she peppered his face with kisses then met his waiting lips again.

He pulled slightly away from her and glanced at the bed. "Stay with me?"

There was absolutely no question in her mind. "Always."

Mockingjay: Broken Wings Chapter 15: Are you ready, Peeta?, a hunger

games fanfic |

FanFiction

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Fourteen: Are you ready, Peeta?

Previously, Katniss and Peeta found out that Katniss was allergic to the baby and it was causing severe high blood pressure (yes this is possible). They finally found their way back to each other, but what happened? Hmmm... Effie went into shock after the escape from the Capitol, Johanna was in surgery, and Peeta gave Coin his list of demands. I wonder if she'll actually abide by them?

This past week I received some pretty amazing emails, pm's, not to mention my regular reviews, that pretty much left me in awe. There aren't a lot of fanfic authors that can say they have the best readers and reviewers and actually mean it, but I do. The words thank you don't seem like enough, but they are all I have, so thank you for being so kind. For such well thought out commentaries. For taking time from your life to read. For actually waiting on the edge of your seat for the next chapter, and for making me feel like I actually get paid for this. Thanks.

My beta A is on vacation till the end of the year so I have a sub. Thank you L for doing such an awesome job and for being one of

my biggest supporters. You rock! S, thank you for all of your hard work and your inquisitive mind. A thanks for making me laugh.

To all of you, I wish you a Merry Christmas. Here is my gift to you.

Mockingjay: Broken Wings

The sound of gunfire...the screams of injured men and women calling out for help...the stench of death, it all haunted Peeta as he sat in the rebel's bunker in District Two, filling him with a loneliness and longing for the sweet breath of life Katniss had brought to him. There was never any down time; battles were constantly being fought throughout the district. 'It's the last one,' Peeta thought to himself. 'We've got control over all the other districts, now all we have to do is get control of Two and it'll be over.' Though he knew the war would be far from over once they completed their mission, success in Two meant he could go back to Katniss and that meant they'd be one step closer to home. Soldiers, both men and women, were huddled around the fire they had built inside of an old coal stove. The night was unnaturally chilly for that time of year and Peeta swore he could feel the cold clear down to the marrow of his bones.

His tired eyes scanned the groups of people: Plutarch and his camera crew were eating some rations across from him, Haymitch was curled up in a ball asleep to his left, Gale, Justus, Lavinia, and a group of other soldiers Peeta had come to know over the past week during their invasion of Two were all talking amongst themselves...looking over a map and trying to figure out how to take down what they all referred to as the Nut. The nickname they had given it came about after Plutarch made a comment about the facility being a 'tough nut to crack.' A mountain, just one of many that covered District Two, but this

one in particular was unique. It held an underground fortress built after the Dark Days when the Capitol was desperate for a new military stronghold. It was filled with caverns, quarries that had been set up after Thirteen had been bombed, loaded with arsenals, military barracks, housed the miners and held a computer system linked directly to the Capitol. The conversation on how to bring the Nut down had been the same for the past three nights, and Peeta was growing weary of the same suggestions being thrown back and forth.

His flashbacks had been carefully monitored by the medical team that had come to lend a helping hand with the wounded in Two, and given Peeta a pen needle full of the medication that enabled him to keep his temper in check...most of the time. But without the stories of his past Katniss had been providing, memories of his former life had yet to resurface. He rested his head against the wall, allowing his brain a brief respite, sketching images in his mind of sunnier places...happier times. Despite his ability to look past the dark confines he was in and see the promise of light, his head just wasn't cooperating with him. All he could think of was Katniss and some of their last moments together. With his elbow digging into his upper thigh, Peeta lifted his fingers to his temple and began rubbing in slow circles. 'What I wouldn't give to be with you right now, Katniss.' He finally caved into his aching heart and relived one of their few nights together. The night he realized exactly how much he loved her, but had yet to say it.

He flashed his eyes towards his hospital bed and asked her, "Stay with me?"

"Always," Katniss answered then took a deep breath before he swooped her up in his arms, letting the pajama pants he loaned her fall to the ground and stay there, carrying her back to bed. "Peeta, please tell me you mean this...that you're not going to change your

mind in fifteen minutes because you're worried you're going to hurt me or you feel guilty or..."

He climbed under the covers next to her and took her in his arms. "Let's make a promise to each other, Katniss." He tried to control his rapidly beating heart when she tucked her hand under his t-shirt and glided it up his torso until her palm rested in the middle of his chest. "I promise I'm not going to leave you because of my current mental state...or any other reason for that matter."

"Me too, Peeta." She rested her head next to her hand on his chest. "I'm not going to make any more threats about it being over between us. We're just going to have to stop acting like children and work through whatever problems arise." She began pressing kisses against his chin, sliding her body upwards until her lips lined up with his, and proceeded to turn his brain into mush.

*"Katniss," before things got out of control, Peeta thought they should set some ground rules. "I want to make my intentions clear here. When I asked you to come back to bed with me it wasn't so we could...um..." she was carrying his baby yet Peeta felt like a child with a schoolboy crush. "Okay..." he fumbled his words, "...I don't want to...no...I **do** want to, but...oh geez," he blew out a breath.*

"Just say what you want to say Peeta," she smiled down into his eyes, and continued kissing him from the side of his jaw up to his ear.

"I don't think we should rush things. I mean...kissing is good..." She flicked the tip of her tongue against his earlobe and he stifled a moan before saying, "Dear God it's...so good, but..." "What the hell was I saying?" He thought to himself.

He worried that he had said something wrong when Katniss pulled away from him and said with a stone face, "No sex."

"Um..." he wasn't going to come right out and say it, but now that she did, "...yeah."

"Peeta," her look of query frightened him. "What are we doing?"

"Huh?" Confused was a good word, no, a great word for his entire thought process.

"Are we friends? Are we husband and wife?" She shook her head like she was trying to clear it and sat upright, staring down at him. "Are we...boyfriend and girlfriend? What the hell are we doing?"

"Okay," he sat up and faced her, "You're mad. I shouldn't have said anything. I should've just let things...happen, right?" Screwing up what they had just rediscovered wasn't what he wanted.

"All I want to know is...what you think we're doing because I'm not playing around here and I'm sick of this whole...tug of war thing we've been doing, so tell me right now...do you want to be with me or don't you?"

"Yes," he said with wide eyes.

"Good." She lifted her eyes to his. "I want to be with you too."

*"Okay," he said nervously. "Thing is...I know what I mean when I say 'be with you,' but I don't know what you mean, and...and..." He hopped out of bed and began pacing back and forth. "Katniss, everyone, and I do mean everyone, has been telling me that we're married, and I believe them. I'm sure it's true. Hell, we're having a baby. Only..." how did he explain that he didn't want to move to fast with her? Or that he **did** want to, but couldn't because if he did, he was sure he would ruin everything they were trying to build? Not to mention she looked absolutely breathtaking sitting in the dim*

room...her ivory skin glowing, her eyes shimmering, and those lips... Peeta let out a grunt, "I need to be married before I...before we do... **anything** we might regret...or not regret, and I know we're married...well, I think I know, but that's not the point." He continued tripping over his tongue when she lifted a hand to cover her mouth. "The point is..." he pressed his lips together and pointed at her when he couldn't think of what to say. "Why do you always get me so damn tongue tied?" A burst of air blew out from between his lips. "All I'm trying to say is...is that I want to remember our vows...or make new ones maybe, before we do...go...I mean we should be..." a shudder ran through his body, "...we need to be...I believe in a lifetime commitment... and if we... Geez!" He ran his hands through his hair leaving it tousled. "Katniss," he finally resigned that he'd never be able to voice his concerns, "I don't know what the hell I'm trying to say."

A, "Pffft," sound coming from behind her hand had Peeta narrowing his gaze at her, taking in the humor dancing in her eyes, the slightly rounded apples of her cheeks and the tremor of her shoulders.

"Are you...laughing at me?" She shook her head in answer and threw her other hand over her mouth too. "Christ, you're laughing at me." A quick shake of his head was all it took to get him to see how funny he must have sounded to her and before he knew it, his chuckle joined in on her light laughter.

"Peeta is everything..." the posted guard came through the door and stopped short. "Oh...um..." he turned his curious expression to Peeta, to Katniss then back to Peeta again.

"Busted," Peeta said innocently which was quickly followed up with a burst of laughter from Katniss.

"Peeta, our orders are to keep you two separate during sleeping hours," the guard said seriously.

"It's okay," he assured him. "I'll let security know first thing in the morning that Katniss has permission to come in at night." Peeta walked towards the door and held it open for the guard. "Thanks for being so quick though. Makes me feel better knowing there's someone out there paying attention to what's going on in here."

"Sure," the guard gave Katniss one more inquisitive look then took his position outside.

Certain that Katniss would start questioning why the guard listened to him, Peeta carefully turned to her, ready to defend himself, but all he saw was Katniss smiling at him from the middle of his hospital bed. Her hair was flowing over her shoulders in thick brown waves and her hand was cupping her stomach. "You..." he walked up to her and held his hand out, then moved it back as though he was afraid of being scorched. "You have a belly," he hadn't noticed it before. "How did I miss this?"

"I hide it with your sweaters," she pulled the pajama shirt taught against her abdomen to show him the little puff that had started to grow.

"Can I...touch it?"

"You don't have to ask, you know." She got onto her knees, her slightly distended abdomen right in front of him. "She's your daughter too."

A rash of nerves flooded through his system as he cupped his hands on the sides of her stomach and placed his cheek against it. "Wow," he said breathlessly. "She's growing."

"Uh huh," the feeling of Katniss' fingers running through his hair as he pressed his face against their baby was as perfect as life had been since he'd been in Thirteen.

The need to capture the moment was overwhelming. "I have to sketch you."

"Sketch me? Now?"

"Yes," Peeta turned to the counter Katniss had climbed down onto and picked up the pad he left there when he saw her feet dangling from the vent. "Now." It hadn't dawned on him that she might not want to be sketched since she had posed for him so many times during their lunch dates...while waiting for tests to be run...while sitting with Effie...

"Peeta, are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely," then it hit him. "It's okay, right?"

Katniss leaned her arms over his shoulders and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I guess, but I was thinking we might spend our night...otherwise occupied." She trailed her lips up to his ear and whispered, "Like getting reacquainted with one another."

"Oh...uh..." Obviously he hadn't been very clear earlier. 'Considering she laughed at you,' he thought to himself, 'I seriously doubt she got the message.'

"I'm fine with waiting, if that's what you want to do." She pressed her lips into his neck then back up to his ear again where her warm breath tickled him to no end. "I'll wait as long as you want, but just because we're waiting doesn't mean we can't..."

He waited for her to fill in the blank, and when she didn't he asked nervously, "Can't what?" Her lips on his, a warm tongue lightly lapping at his, her fingers through his hair, and her full, moist mouth torturing him into sweet submission was her answer. Five minutes? Ten? Peeta

had no clue how long they had been at it. All he knew was that his sketchpad had been forgotten dropped to the floor right before he pulled her body close to his. Within a matter of seconds she was lying on her back, he was on top of her, and their kiss went from a curious discovery to sensual and steamy. The only time they came up for air was when he asked, "Am I hurting you...pressing against the baby?"

"No," she pulled him back down and the whole world vanished.

Thoughts of not rushing into anything were completely unrealistic. Keeping their relationship light and airy... 'Good luck with that,' Peeta thought to himself when he dug his fingers into her hips and pulled her close to him. When the air became so thick they could barely breathe, they finally pulled apart from each other, though neither one of them wanted to. "I...just have...to cat...catch my...breath," he rested his forehead against hers.

"Good God," her panting sounded like a train pulling into the station. "Okay...this is going to be very difficult."

"No kidding," he braced himself onto his elbows so his full weight didn't press down onto her. "What are we going to do?"

"Obviously we're skipping the whole...innocent boyfriend/girlfriend thing and going straight to the hot and bothered part of our relationship." She pressed her palm against her forehead. "That should be fun to relive."

"You mean we went through this before?" That had never really crossed his mind.

"Oh, yeah, and it was horrible." She grinned. "Wonderful...but horribly frustrating."

A little huff of laughter came out of him. "Glad I don't remember that. Sounds like you went through hell."

"Shut up," she smacked at his shoulder playfully. "You suck."

"That's because I'm a boy, and boys suck." His teasing was surely tormenting her, but he was having so much fun. "See? I didn't forget everything you ever said to me."

"That doesn't count. I said it a few weeks ago." She let out a huge gust of air. "Okay, get off of me and get that damn sketchpad."

"I thought we were..."

"You want to wait?" She asked him with a serious look in her eyes.

"Um..." he was actually reconsidering. "I guess."

"Then pick up the damn pad and pencils and sketch my happy ass." She pushed gently at his shoulders. "Where do you want me?"

'Everywhere and anywhere,' was the first thing that popped into his head as he bent to pick up the discarded pad. "Lie on your back." He positioned her so she was half on her back and half on her side. "I can't see the baby." His fingers found the buttons on her shirt and began undoing them from the bottom up then pushed the shirt over her hip leaving one button closed at the top to keep her breasts covered. "Can I pull the blanket down?" Her brow arched her lip quirked and Peeta remembered that her underwear was hanging over a shower rod drying. "Never mind," he gulped.

She skimmed the blanket down her torso and tucked it under herself leaving her stomach and left hip exposed. "Better?" He had never heard a more alluring word in his life.

"Yeah," he cleared his throat and took notice of the tiny freckles glaring at him below her hip, thinking, 'Okay, maybe sketching her wasn't such a good idea after all.'

"Sketch away..." she quirked a smile at him, "...cinnamon buns."

His eyes flashed to hers when he heard the name of Johanna's story character come out of her. "How do you know about Prince Cinnamon Buns?"

"Prince?"

"Yeah," he answered as he took a pencil to paper. "Prince Buns and Princess Fireball."

Katniss let out a laugh. "Where on earth did you hear that?"

"Johanna." He glanced up. "Put your head on your arm and look at me," he gently ordered her.

"So...I'm a princess and you're a prince. I'm definitely going to have to give her some grief for that one."

It was the last thing he heard as he got lost in a world of lines and shades. Sketching the curve of her hip, the swell of her stomach, it all caused a feeling of wanton need to surge within him. With each stroke of his pencil's lead Peeta could swear it was his fingers caressing the slope of her thin neck, the angle of her chin, the dip of her belly button and that line...that dark line that ran straight down, had his mind wandering where he knew it shouldn't be going. By the time he reached her legs, which were tangled in the sheets, he didn't need to look...he remembered, but he kept his eyes focused on her limbs just the same until he reached the tiny arch of her foot, and then he lost his concentration. The sketchpad was tossed onto the floor as he

reached for her foot and pressed his thumbs against the ball of it. "You fell out of a tree and fractured this foot," he could see her falling in slow motion into his arms and both of them landing in a bank of snow. "Real or..."

"Real," she whispered. "It was the last time I went into the woods alone, and I got trapped."

"I was worried about you," his eyes wandered up her body until they reached hers. "Scared of you getting caught by Peacekeepers."

"Yes," she nodded.

"We were engaged, weren't we?" He asked remembering a fight they had. "You ran away," there was pain in his voice. "You left me."

"No, Peeta. No." She shook her head and reached for him. "I needed time to think about our engagement...about life."

"You didn't want to marry me, did you?"

"Yes, I did," she answered with certainty in her voice. "I was the one that planned our surprise wedding in Twelve, and I did that because I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you."

He wanted to ask her if she still felt that way, but he was so afraid of what her answer would be. "They were waiting at your house for us," his memory of that night was flooding back in tidal waves of emotion. "We fought..."

"We made up," she reached down and stroked his cheek.

"You were in so much pain, Katniss," his voice cracked as he crawled up the bed to lie next to her. "You hurt your tailbone," he rubbed at it as though she had just fallen, "and my fingers were numb."

She placed soft kisses against his cheek and held him close. "I asked you to stay with me."

A gentle smile hinted at his lips. "I asked you to do that tonight."

"And I answered you the way you answered me back then. The way we always answer."

"I must have loved you a lot back then." If it was even half what he was currently feeling he could understand why they got married.

"You did," there was a hint of sadness in her tone. "We loved each other very much."

The sound of voices swelled in the hallway. Their sleepless night was coming to an end, and morning was quickly beckoning as the skeleton nighttime staff was replaced with the full daytime one. "You should button your shirt before they come in here. I get a shot first thing in the morning, and they'll be looking for you to prep you for that procedure," he said with regret filling his voice. "Katniss," he ran his hands through her hair, then took hold of her hands placing kisses against each one. "Remembering those vows we took means a lot to me, and if I can't remember them..." he glanced down then back up again, "...it wouldn't mean as much. I'm not sure if I'll ever remember them, but one day...maybe we can..." he wanted to say get married again, but it sounded silly to him so he let his sentence trail off.

"We can make new ones," Katniss suggested softly into his ear, "but not until we're both ready. Until then we'll just take it one step at a time. By the way," her breath fluttered the hair by his ear, "I really like the idea of going back to our horribly frustrating days."

Peeta let out a little chuckle. "I think I'm going to enjoy this next stage of our relationship, Katniss."

"I'm already enjoying it," she wagged her brows at him and kissed him softly then tucked her head under his chin and let out a satisfied sigh.

"...look at it?" Peeta glanced up at Gale who was towering over him.

"Huh?" He hadn't heard anything the guy said.

"I said they want to know if you want to take a look at it." Gale stared at him then followed up with, "The schematics for the Nut."

"Oh, uh...not really. It'll probably look like a blur." Peeta rubbed at his eyes, "I'm exhausted."

"Should I worry?" Gale eyed him up.

Lack of rest always seemed to get Peeta's ire up. "I'll get back to you on that." He rested his head against the wall, closed his eyes, and let sleep take him over before a flashback did.

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The words President's Quarters were staring back at Katniss as she turned the knob to enter the room she had prepared for her and Peeta almost six weeks earlier. With the book Regina gave her tucked under her arm, Katniss walked into the bedroom and stood staring at the bed. Since it was smaller than the one she and Peeta shared in District Twelve, the luxurious quilt that covered it spread out a few

inches onto the floor. A fine layer of dust had settled on the furniture, a discarded shirt of Peeta's lay on the floor, the latest sketch Peeta had drawn of her was propped up against a couple of cups Katniss had found in the small kitchen area. His easel and paint supplies were tucked away in a corner, a partially painted portrait of Effie perched atop of it, and the spices she had sitting on the dresser looked out of place, sort of how Katniss felt while Peeta and Gale were off fighting and she was stuck in Thirteen.

It was the same story each day she awoke. Yawn, stretch, rub her baby bump that practically grew overnight, and for a few seconds forget that her life was a complete disaster. Then the realization that Peeta was gone would smack her in the face, and this time she didn't have the option to talk to Gale about it because he was gone too. The thought that she might lose both of them marred any prospective happiness for the day, and the camera crew that had been left behind to film her every move was no help. The only reason she didn't complain was because Peeta was able to watch the propos in Two, and she was willing to do anything to help encourage the rebels out there. The sound of her sigh almost echoed through the room as she sat on the center of the bed with her book in her lap.

"Dear Maysee," most of her journal entries started off addressed to Peeta, while he was gone she had written to him in lieu of talking to him so the residents didn't think their Mockingjay had completely lost her mind. When he got back and turned her away, writing to him was the only option she had and pouring out her heart onto the pages of her book was the closest thing she had next to having a silent dialogue with herself. It wasn't until Prim brought her the book shortly after she had been diagnosed, that Katniss took to writing her entries to her unborn daughter.

"What's that?" Peeta noticed the book sitting on Katniss' lap.

"My medical journal," she ran her hand over the cover. "Regina gave it to me while you were away so I would stop moving my lips and scaring the people of Thirteen." She let out a tiny laugh.

"What's in it?"

"Everything," Katniss thought of the different things she had put into the book since getting it. "Most of it is filled with letters to you, but there are a couple of songs in here, some lunatic ramblings," she smiled playfully, "A few doodles...pretty much whatever was in my head that I wanted to share with you, but couldn't."

He gave his head a little tilt. "You mean...you've written to...me?" She nodded. "Can I read it?"

She clutched the book to her chest and said, "Sure...just...not right now."

"I don't have to read it at all, Katniss. Those are your private thoughts...like my sketchpad, so I completely understand if you want to keep it to yourself."

"You let me look through your sketchpad without complaining." There were things she had written she was sure would aggravate him, things that would probably cause him to feel guilty or bring on unnecessary pain, and since they had been getting along so well lately, Katniss didn't want to tempt fate. "Let's just give it a little time and then you can read it if you want."

Peeta grinned at her. "I take it you've complained about me in there."

Katniss had to hide her smile before admitting to him, "Maybe, but most of it's not complaints."

He sat at the foot of her bed, "Planning on writing in it today?"

"I would, but...I don't think I can." Her brow furrowed. "The only time I was able to get anything out was when I pretended I was talking to you, and now you're here so..." she gave her shoulder a slight shrug.

"So pretend you're still talking to me in there."

"Won't work. If I want to talk to you all I have to do is open my mouth and speak. Why would I write?"

Peeta looked up at the ceiling as though he were deep in thought, "Hey...why don't you write to the baby? You can tell her all about the things that are happening...complain about me if you want," he said with a frisky tone, "and share some of your thoughts with her?"

"The baby? Hmmm...it's not like she'd be reading it or anything," Katniss reasoned with herself. "Guess I'll give it a go later on."

It had taken her a few tries, but Katniss was finally able to get out a couple of entries, though nothing of importance. Today though...today was different. She was lonely, more so than normal, and missed having Peeta around to talk to. She pressed her fingers into the side of her lower abdomen when she felt the bubbly sensation start; trying to relieve some of the gas pressure that had built up, then began writing.

Dear, Maysee,

There's a lot to tell you today. Suppose I should start with your dad, but I can't really think about him right now. It's too hard, but I will. I'll tell you about him, just not at this very second.

Katniss let her eyes drift upwards, trying to figure out a different topic of conversation. She chewed on the end of her pen for a minute before writing again.

There are so many people here who love you already, and even though Johanna won't admit it out loud, I think she's looking forward to meeting you. According to your aunt Regina, Johanna made it out of the Capitol just in the nick of time. It took three surgeries to repair all of the damage the Capitol caused her. The first one happened the night she got to Thirteen. Regina repaired her internal bleeding, but a couple of days later Johanna started to lose blood again at a rapid rate. They had to operate on her again, your Aunt Prim got to be there for that one, and that's when they discovered that the seal they put on Johanna's liver to stop the bleeding wasn't holding, and had to replace it. A few days later one of the nurses saw Johanna pushing her hospital bed around her room and came to the conclusion that she had been doing so since she was able to stand after her first surgery, and that's why she kept on having internal bleeding. Your dad yelled at her when he found out what she was doing and asked her why she did it when they wheeled her in for another surgery, and she told him she couldn't get far enough away from the sound of her leaky faucet in the bathroom. Your dad checked it out, thinking he'd fix it for her. Thing is, there was no leak. It was all in Johanna's head. Dr. Valero decided to put her in a medically induced coma for over two weeks giving her body time to heal. She's doing a lot better now, but she's still in a lot of pain, and the artificial liver, they had to give her one during her third surgery, seems to be working just as good as her real one did. Your grandpa Haymitch keeps telling her she's lucky because she can drink for the rest of her life without having to worry about pickling her liver. He's a twisted man that grandfather of yours.

Your grandma Effie on the other hand...

Katniss let out a sigh as she thought of everything Effie was going through.

Oh, banana nut, your grandma is having a very hard time adjusting to life since being rescued. After what happened to her security guard and Portia, she went into a tailspin. Your dad and Gale told me everything that Peacekeeper did to get him to safety, about the way he dedicated himself to making sure your grandma made it out of the Capitol alive, and how he died only after making certain your grandma would be protected. Haymitch wanted to hold a little memorial for the guy, even asked Plutarch to figure out some way of showing how grateful we all were for his sacrifice, but nothing's been done so far, and his ashes are locked up in the memorial garden section of Thirteen. Sounds like a nice place, doesn't it? Well, it's not. I found the memorial garden and it's not a garden at all. It's a large security closet housing the ashes of Thirteen's dead. When I told Gale about it he actually went to Coin and hinted that District Two might have their own traditions to uphold when someone dies, but she couldn't be bothered with it, and pretty much blew him off. Haymitch said he'll get Steven's ashes (that's the Peacekeeper's name) out once things settle down and the war ends, but who knows what will happen? He's been so preoccupied with Effie since she got back. She didn't wake up for almost twenty-four hours after Justus gave her a shot on the hovercraft and when she did, all of us were holding our breath, waiting for her to say something, but she didn't. She didn't say a thing for almost five days. She just lied in bed staring into space. Your dad and I went to visit her every day. We talked to her, told her all about you, but nothing seemed to get through her. It wasn't until Lavinia and Gale were appointed as your dad's guards for the day that your grandma said something. I know I shouldn't laugh, but it was pretty funny at the time. We were all sitting around her room talking, Gale and Lavinia were standing at the door pretty much keeping to themselves when Effie got up and started walking around the room. None of us thought

anything of it because she had been doing that for a couple of days, but the next thing we knew she had strolled up to Lavinia, and we all thought maybe she was going to say something, instead we saw her disarm Gale in the blink of an eye. All of us jumped back, your dad wanted me to hide in the bathroom, but I didn't have to.

Haymitch was yelling, "Put the gun down, Effie!" I was yelling at Haymitch to stop yelling, and your dad held his hand out to her asking her if there was a reason she wanted the gun.

"Mom, did you want to take Gale's gun?" He said.

And we're all just standing there staring at her when she nods.

Then he says, "Do you want to shoot someone?"

Now I'm hoping to high heaven she's going to say no, so you can imagine my relief when she shook her head back and forth and started pointing at something on the weapon. The next thing we know, Effie found her voice, "You'll only get a hundred decent shots if you have it on the standard setting," she says to Gale and flips a couple of switches on the gun. "This one will give you more power, longer range and up to twice as many shots, but you'll have to practice your aim. The only reason you didn't kill Mr. Tanner instantly is because you have terrible aim when it comes to guns." She flipped the weapon over in her palm and handed it right back to him. You should have seen the look on Gale's face. I swear you could hear his jaw hit the ground, and I could tell he was embarrassed by being outsmarted by a Capitol escort. Me and your dad laughed about it under the oak tree that afternoon. We called the doctor into the room right after grandma Effie gave Gale the gun back, and of course we were all excited to hear from her, but she went right back to being as quiet as a mouse again. A few days later we found out Lavinia stopped by her room and took her away to something Regina calls therapy. She was gone for

about six to eight hours a day and Haymitch had no idea where she went, but whenever she came back, he said she seemed happier, and a few weeks ago she actually got up and took a shower on her own instead of Haymitch having to help her bathe. She's even kept eye contact with him and held his hand, so we're keeping our fingers crossed that she'll find her way back to us soon. Regina says that it might be a gradual thing or something could simply snap her out of it one day. Your dad is hoping she'll just snap out of it, maybe correct his manners or something, but I don't really know. I've seen this sort of thing before with your other grandmother when my dad died, and no matter what kind of medicine they've been giving to Effie, she still seems as bad as my mom did. Your dad though...he refuses to give up on her, and since he's been in District Two, I've done my best to try and get her out of her slump, but nothing is working, and she seemed like she was taking a few steps backwards. Since she's getting around on her own now, and we were all afraid whatever progress she made would be out the window, Regina thought it might be good for her to have a job...you know, do something with her time instead of just sitting on her hospital bed and staring into space, so your grandpop suggested taking her into the kitchen with him. Now I know Effie Trinket and that woman can barely make a cup of tea on her own, so I'm not quite sure what she's doing in the kitchen, but I'm thinking pops suggested it so he could keep an eye on her for your dad.

Writing about Peeta, even in the slightest of tenses, brought back the feelings of sorrow she had started with when she began writing. Katniss ran a hand over her belly and said, "Oh banana nut, your dad and I have really gone through hell, haven't we? Guess we all have," she glanced down at her stomach, "even you and you're not born yet, but at least we know things are better now. Let's just hope they stay that way." Regina had high hopes forty-eight hours after performing the procedure in which she administered a drug into the amniotic fluid in a last attempt to counteract Katniss' allergic reaction. Once they

made it to the seventy-two hour mark and Katniss actually had low blood pressure, she was given her discharge from the hospital but had to wear a bracelet that monitored the baby as well as her own vitals. "I couldn't wait to get out of there that day, and once I did, I was going to bring your dad straight here, but that didn't work out too well."

"You have to be quiet, Peeta." Katniss flashed him a dirty look. "What are you laughing at?"

"I've never heard anyone scold someone so loudly in a hushed tone before."

"That makes no sense," she was sort of frustrated at how he was blowing off her suggestion to be quiet. "If we get caught in here do you have any idea what will happen?"

"No," he chuckled, "and I don't think you do either."

"Oh....shut up."

"Make me," he poked her in the precise spot that tickled her.

"Don't," she giggled. "I'm serious," her scowl took over the second her giggle died.

"I know," he teased her. "You're soooo serious, Katniss."

"I hate it when you do that," she turned on him. "That's it. I'm not taking you." She stood with her fists balled up on her hips. "You want to see it, go find it yourself."

"Oooh, an adventure." He took off down one of the halls she had yet to explore through. "You coming or what?"

"That's not the way," she called out to him then lowered her voice down. "Peeta, that's not the..." she rolled her eyes and bit her bottom lip, "Damn you," she mumbled as she hurried to catch up with him. "Where do you think you're going?" She whispered loudly to him when he ducked into a narrow doorway.

"Looks like a closet." He leaned against a wall and it gave way, swinging backwards on a hidden hinge. "Holy cow."

"Oh my God," Katniss stepped into the large warehouse that housed an enormous amount of items. "Bet you these are the books Plutarch talked about," she said as she trailed her fingers across the shelves they were lined up on.

"Coin told me about them," Peeta pulled one down and flipped through the pages. "There's some kind of protective coating on this," he said absently when he felt the slickness of the pages between his fingers, and then put the book back on the shelf, taking another one off and finding the same. "She said they talk about the history of our world before the Dark Days."

"Plutarch said that's where they got the idea for a new government from." Katniss pulled a book off the shelf and said, "This one is called American History."

"Let me see it," Peeta shoved the other one back and began flipping through it. "Hey, did you notice it's not as dusty as the rest of them?"

Katniss shook her head from side to side and made her way past the books and began picking up various items from the shelving behind that. "Wonder why they have all these vases and things?"

Peeta followed the sound of her voice and took a deep breath, "That's...geez..." he ran his hand over the case that housed a large statue then turned to Katniss, "This is Venus di Milo."

"Who?"

She watched as Peeta walked around the partially clothed statue of a woman with no arms in awe. "Venus di Milo," he said softly. "This is from...God; I don't even know how old this is." His smile seemed to radiate a ray of light like none she had ever seen. "The story is this sculpture is of the Greek goddess of love and beauty. Her arms are rumored to have been holding a sash or something, and an apple...I think, but they were lost. Now this is a talent I'd kill to have." He lifted his eyes to Katniss and said, "Well...maybe not kill, but I'd definitely love to be able to sculpt."

"Don't you do that already?" She really had no desire to stare at some half naked lady missing some limbs that was getting his undivided attention. "I've seen those cakes of yours. That's sculpting, isn't it?"

"A flower is a far cry from a woman." He let out a little chuckle, "Plus the sugar probably would've melted by now."

"Or it would have been eaten by soldiers because they were starving to death." She gave him a little grin. "Still...I think your cakes are spectacular works of art."

"Thank you," he walked up behind her and placed a kiss in the crook of her neck. "I should have finagled some sugar rations from Coin so I could bake you a cake."

"Yes you should have," she leaned back into his chest and saw it through the shelving. "Peeta! Look!" She grabbed his hand and dragged him around to a wall lined with works of art enclosed in glass

cases. "Isn't this it? Starry Night?" Katniss waited for a response and got none. "Peeta?"

"Effie said she'd take me to see this when we went back to the Capitol," his voice was low and full of regret.

"When did she say that?" Katniss looked at the original work of art that matched the framed print that hung on a wall in their bedroom.

"At the end of the Victory Tour." He stepped closer to it and sucked in a breath. "Do you think she'll ever come back to us, Katniss?" His eyes were so sad...lost.

"I know she will," her hands cradled his face. "You just wait and see. Effie will be down here snooping around with us in no time, and I bet you anything she'll have a thing or two to say to Coin about threatening her granddaughter." It had never dawned on Katniss to keep that bit of information from Effie. From her own mother, yes, but not Effie.

Peeta graced her with a warm smile, "I'd like to be a fly on the wall for that conversation."

"Who do you think will get out of the room alive?" Katniss stood behind Peeta and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Effie or Coin and her army?"

"Effie," Peeta said without hesitation. "Definitely Effie." He stood staring at it for a few minutes then turned her into his arms. "Look at how beautiful the swirls of color are, Katniss. The way the artist captured the warmth of the tiny village." He pressed his lips against her temple. "Did you know he painted this from the sanitarium he was in? This was the view from his window."

Katniss wondered if the artist had nightmares like Peeta and found a release in painting the same way he did, but she didn't ask. "This makes me miss home."

*"**This** reminds you of District Twelve?" He thumbed at the painting.*

"Our bedroom," she said softly against his chin. "There were so many nights that I'd wake up and you'd be staring at that print, just studying it like it was the first time you ever saw it," she cupped his cheek in her hand. "It was so hard to take my eyes off of you."

"I don't remember that," his forlorn tone broke her heart.

"You don't have to," she kissed him lightly on the lips. "Look at it now," she trailed her finger down his chiseled jawline, "and I'll look at you, just like I used to." They were silent as he studied the image and she studied him. "There," she kissed his chin, "we just made a new memory, and now we can both share it."

He held her face in his hand gazing into her eyes for so long, Katniss felt her spine tingle. "Do you know how crazy I am about you?"

"I might have an idea," she grinned.

"No," he shook his head, "you have no idea, Katniss. No idea at all."

The second his lips met hers Katniss felt her heart soar and ache all at the same time. A fluttering erupted in her stomach as her chest tightened. She had loved him before, but what she felt now was so much more than she could have ever imagined.

The history book Peeta had brought to the room with him sat on the nightstand. Katniss picked his shirt off of the floor and lifted it to her face, inhaling the clean scent of him. "I miss you," she mouthed as

she placed it under the pillow next to her journal and went to find Effie. It was time she did what she promised Peeta she'd do. It was time to bring Effie back to life.

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Effie stood at the sink scrubbing a ton of some sort of filthy root Peeta's father had dumped into a large metal tub. Water ran over her hands as the bustling sounds of the daily meal preparation went on behind her. There were many people here that laughed at her, she knew this, had overheard a few of them on occasion talking about the uppity Capitol escort that had been banished to the kitchen. Did she care? No. She deserved all of the harsh words people had spoken about her behind her back, and then some.

"Trinket," someone called to her from the doorway. "Soldiers are here for you."

"Probably taking her to jail," someone on the staff murmured.

"That's enough," Peeta's father always came to her defense when he overheard them, but she really wished he wouldn't say anything at all. The last thing she needed was to feel responsible for yet another human being when so many of the people she cared about seemed to meet an untimely death because of her. "See you tomorrow, Effie," Bing gave her a soft nod before ordering one of the staff that had

mocked her to take over the scrubbing, and though she didn't want it to, it brought a little lilt of a smile to Effie's lips.

"You're needed in medical," one of the soldiers said to her, and Effie simply followed them back to the hospital. Her home while being in Thirteen.

As her quiet footsteps made their way down the halls, Effie studied the two guards that had come to fetch her, and noticed their extra weapon was no longer a large bump at their ankle, and their main weapon was now more secure. She lifted the corner of her lip in a slight grin at the thought of her last trip to 'therapy' with Lavinia and Justus then let her attempt at a smile droop when she remembered that they hadn't been there for a week and now she was stuck in the kitchen washing produce that had been covered in grime. She gave herself a little shiver at the thought, looked at her nails, which were a complete wreck, her hands which were dry and in desperate need of lotion, and reached up to touch her hair which felt limp and lifeless.

"There she is," Venia smiled brightly when Effie entered the room and looked around at all that had been laid out and the camera that had been set up to film the commotion.

"Effie, you must come take a look at this," Flavius walked her around the room showing her the dresses Cinna had designed for Katniss that she could no longer wear. "Katniss has insisted on Annie wearing one of her dresses for the wedding!"

Effie's eyes lifted towards Annie when she heard the word, 'wedding.' Her fingers flew to her throat and her smile spread across her face when Annie walked up to her and held her hands. "Finnick and I will never know how to thank you. If it wasn't for you, this would never be possible." Annie threw her arms around Effie's neck and gave her a

hug. "Thank you, Effie," she whispered in her ear. "You saved my life...Finnick's life."

A huge lump formed in her throat at Annie's declaration. Watching her try on various dresses had been quite a treat, and for a brief moment Effie was envious of the girl who got to wear something so beautiful and feel like a pampered woman. Katniss on the other hand was acting very much like herself. Trying on the different dresses Cinna had designed for her, complaining because she *had* to try them on then expressing her feelings in a very rude manner. "I'm sick of trying these damn things on!" Katniss pulled a flowing gown over her head. "It's not like I'm the one getting married! Christ!"

"Oh, it fits!" Octavia exclaimed. "Your breasts look divine in this," the prep team member gushed as though her compliment should have sent Katniss' head into the clouds. "Here are the shoes," Octavia slipped them onto Katniss' feet. "Perfect!" She exclaimed.

"Good grief," Katniss stared at herself in the mirror they had brought into Effie's hospital room for the day. "This is ridiculous. I should just wear my uniform. Beetee's made all sorts of adjustments to it so it'll fit me." Effie couldn't help but walk up to Katniss who looked absolutely radiant wearing the soft pink dress adorned with miniscule pearls on the bodice and iridescent sequins. The gauzy full skirt flowed down to the floor from just below her breast and the straps hung loosely in waves around her upper arms. "I am not wearing this thing. They want to film me...they'll have to do it while I'm wearing my uniform." Katniss hauled the dress up to her knees and was just about to storm off when Effie slapped her hand.

"Drop that skirt young lady," the sound of Effie's voice had the entire room turning towards her. "Have some manners," she scolded Katniss, then stood behind her with her hands on her shoulders,

staring at the reflection in the mirror. "You look lovely darling, so quit complaining and act like the proper young lady I know you can be." She turned to the rest of the room and said, "I don't suppose any of you have a bit of lotion? My hands are terribly dry." All three prep team members held out various bottles from their kits. "One will suffice," she gave her head a little tilt then walked to Annie to voice her congratulations.

"You know," Katniss unzipped the dress and kicked her shoes off, "if I had known I was going to get yelled at, I would've never even put the damn dress on."

"Oh, pish posh," Effie waved a hand at her. "Now..." she said with excitement in her eyes, "what do we have that might fit me? I cannot in good conscience continue to wear this drab gray...thing." She gave her clothes a little tug. "Maybe if it were fitted, or...turned into a nice little pencil skirt."

"I could probably do that," Venia looked over the garment. "All I'd need is a needle and thread...scissors...yes," she eyed Effie up from behind. "I think I could make some very nice adjustments to this."

"Here," Katniss threw a deep red dress that no longer fit her to Octavia. "Do something with that too."

"Oh Katniss, I couldn't take this it's..." Effie reached out a hand and ran her fingers over the luxurious material. "Well...it's not like it's going to fit you any longer, and you can't really wear red to a wedding." For the first time in weeks Effie Trinket finally felt like herself again, and she knew exactly who it was that had made that possible. "You're quite a sneaky little thing, aren't you?" she said to Katniss who was the last one left in her room. "Arranging this dress fitting...bringing in such lovely things," she cocked her brow, "...lifting your skirt," she said with puckered lips.

"I didn't do a damn thing," Katniss smoothed out the tight gray shirt she was wearing then pulled one of Peeta's sweaters over it. "I have no clue what you're talking about. I hate dress fittings, and as you could see, there are only two left that fit me, so why should I even bother with dressing up?"

"Of course you hate them dear," Effie gave her hand a pat, "which is why I owe you a great deal of thanks."

"I told you..."

Effie lifted her now moisturized hand up to silence Katniss. "Simply say 'you're welcome' so we can move on."

She tried not to smile when Katniss grumbled out a, "Welcome."

"Wonderful," Effie gave Katniss a once over and told herself to have the prep team work on some maternity clothes for her. Her petite frame seemed to show the growth of her child quite a bit and her clothing barely fit her. However, there were much more pressing issues at hand. "Why don't we have a seat and you can fill me in on my darling boy, and Haymitch?"

"I've got a better idea," Katniss wagged her brows at Effie. "Why don't you come with me, and we can get the hell out of this hospital?"

The offer was too tempting. "Anywhere but that kitchen," Effie shuddered. "I do appreciate your father in law's attempt to help me, but...scrubbing roots?"

Katniss' let out a tinkle of laughter and said, "Nice to have you back, Effie."

"Perhaps for you, but I don't think our new president is going to be too thrilled to hear about my recovery." Effie followed Katniss through the halls until they walked through the doorway marked Do Not Enter. A slight rush of adrenaline shot through her at the prospect of breaking Coin's rules, though she kept it to herself as Katniss had instructed her to keep silent. When Katniss led her into the storage facility used to house the historical memorabilia, Effie's hand flew to her chest. "Why on earth is all of this in hiding?" She turned to Katniss. "The people of this district...this nation have a right to culture. They could make a museum of sorts...broaden their children's minds."

"I knew you'd like this place, but Peeta and I have a theory on why they're not letting everyone know about it, other than the fact that this stuff would probably disintegrate if too many people touched it." Katniss showed Effie some of the history books. "There are a few of them that have less dust than the others, and Peeta thinks those are the ones Coin and Plutarch talked about." Katniss explained to Effie what the plan was for the end of the war. "Peeta was reading one of the books, it's hidden in a private room, but he said there's some very interesting things inside of it that he was sure our new president didn't want us to know."

"Oh my," Effie ran her hand over the spine of one of the books with hardly any dust. "I think I shall read this one," her nimble fingers plucked it from the shelf. "You said there's a private room that I can read in?"

"Well...it's sort of...uh..." Katniss guided Effie out of the storage facility and brought her to the room she and Peeta shared without anyone's knowledge. "I wanted to make it like home for Peeta. The quarters they have here are kind of cold...unwelcoming."

The surge of pride Effie felt when she saw the room Katniss had created brought a smile to her face. "I am sure Peeta loves it. Why I bet..." her eyes landed on the partially painted portrait of herself. "Oh my. Oh my," she stared at her battered and beaten image draped in a sheet, lying in a hospital bed, staring back with empty eyes. "Oh my poor boy," she trailed her fingers along the edge of it. "What I have put him through," she turned to Katniss, "put you all through? Can you ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Effie." Katniss stepped closer to her. "The way I see it, your brain was in need of a mental break from all of this, but you're back now...so..." she gave her shoulders a little shrug. "I'm just glad I don't have to keep facing Peeta's absence alone."

"No darling," she pulled the girl in for a hug and was surprised at how tightly Katniss clutched her. "You'll never be alone again." Effie held onto her for a few more moments then said, "Now...let's get down to business and see what kind of trouble we can get into, hmmm?" She gave the book a pat, and Katniss a smile.

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"Peeta, I've got her on the line," Plutarch held a phone out to him.

"Hel..." he cleared his throat. "Hello."

"Hey," the sound of Katniss on the other end was like a breath of fresh spring air.

"Katniss," he sighed out and collapsed to the ground. It had been three days since he had spoken to her and yet it had felt like a lifetime. "Are you okay? Is the baby okay? What's going on over there?" His questions tumbled out.

"I'm lonely. Banana nut is healthy, and I have a surprise for you. Hold on."

There was a shuffling sound on the other end of the phone, and some mumbled words then he heard her and his heart cracked. "Mom? Is that you?"

"Oh my darling boy," the sound of Effie's voice was music to his ears. "Dear one, how are you? Katniss has been catching me up on your propos and you look...tired."

Peeta let out a little burst of laughter. "That's putting it mildly." He knew he wasn't holding up too well. His flashbacks were happening a couple of times a day and his weapons had been taken from him unless he was going into battle. "I'm doing okay though. I swear," he lied.

"You're stronger than you think, Peeta," her voice was full of encouragement. "You remember that."

"I will." He sniffed and wiped his runny nose. Katniss' feelings of loneliness weren't foreign to him. He had been suffering through a terrible bout of depression without her near. "Mom, is Katniss really doing okay?"

"She's wonderful, though I will admit, she's a touch blue knowing you're there and she can't be. However, I have been keeping her quite busy."

"Good. And you? How are you?"

"Right as rain my dear," he could hear the smile in Effie's voice.

"Listen, we only have five minutes to talk and Haymitch is standing next to me with a goofy grin plastered on his face, so why don't I let you talk to him, okay?"

"Thank you darling," he could hear the little quiver of excitement in her voice at his suggestion. "Please take care and remember how much I love you."

"Love you too...and mom, you take care of my girls, okay?" Peeta didn't wait for an answer, he just handed the phone to Haymitch's outstretched ones.

"Trinkie!? Holy shit! Trinkie!" In all the time Peeta had known Haymitch he had never seen the man look so happy. Though he was thrilled that Effie was cogent, Peeta hoped that Haymitch didn't use up all his allotted phone time. Talking to Katniss was the only way he was able to make it through this time away from her, and the battles he had been fighting each day brought up too many memories of the arena. Haymitch understood, he had been in there himself, but the man wasn't in Two to fight like Peeta was, he was there to keep Peeta from harm or from causing it. Unfortunately Peeta hadn't listened to his mentor when he told him to stay away from the front line, and the fighting was taking a toll on him.

"Kid, you can't be rushing up there like the rest of these soldiers. They're trained for battle. You're not."

"No," Peeta pulled on his gauntlets, "I'm trained for much worse." He held his hands out and said, "Good morning," and felt a rush when the gloves formed to his hands. "If you're going to stand there and spend your time bellyaching about my wanting to put an end to this damn war, then I don't want to hear it, old man."

Haymitch reached out his hand and placed it on Peeta's shoulder, "You think Katniss is going to be thrilled with the idea of you going out there and putting yourself in danger?"

"I think Katniss would be fighting right beside me if she were here," Peeta practically growled at him. "And do me a favor. Don't go using her against me. I don't really appreciate it. You want to help me, grab a gun and let's go, otherwise get off my back." He turned to Gale, "Let's do this."

A huge gust of air expelled from Peeta's lungs when he thought of his first fight with Snow's army. The lives he had taken, regardless of them being the enemy, chipped little bits of his soul away.

Gale was crouched down behind a large boulder speaking for Justus, who was drawing out a diagram into the earth with a stick. "I'll go in here. Justus and Crandall will come around the side. Lavinia, can you get into that tree without them noticing?" Everyone had been impressed with her climbing skills. The girl gave Gale a hefty nod and patted at her weapons. "Great, Peeta, you stay back here and watch for..."

"I'm not staying back," he gave Gale a stern warning. "I'm here to help, not to be as pretty as a picture. If you want to win, you're going to need me."

"Fine...you can cover me," Gale said.

"We'll cover each other," Peeta wasn't about to be treated with kid gloves.

"Lavinia," Gale motioned for the girl to head towards the large elm. "We'll wait till you signal us."

Peeta pushed at the bump on his left shoulder enabling voice commands for his weapons to be dispersed. "Right heat, left star." The film crew took a close up shot of his gauntlets while everyone else stood back and watched as something shot out from Peeta's uniform and into his right hand. The sharp six inch blade began to glow then darken to a deep wine color within seconds. In his left hand a thin, black star shaped blade slid across his palm and into his fingertips.

"What's heat do?" Gale asked as he walked quietly beside Peeta, keeping his eyes peeled for the enemy.

Peeta stuck his palm out and it a shake showing Gale the knife that had attached itself to his glove.

"Does it stay there?" Gale asked.

"Yeah, unless I order it to drop," Peeta explained, careful not to use the word, release, as the knife would then separate from his gauntlet. "The blade is scorching hot. Slices through bone like butter." Peeta whipped around when he heard a crack and threw a star into the forehead of an oncoming soldier, who had appeared out of nowhere, barreling down on them. Another star shot into the palm of his hand, and would continue to do so until Peeta ran out of the twenty plus thin blades that were stored in his uniform.

"Aren't you afraid those will cut you, Peeta?" One of the camera crew members asked him from behind.

"No. The gloves are made to withstand the sharpest of blades, and bullets, kind of like my uniform," he didn't want to answer them, but he did want to help the rebellion. "Stay here," he pointed at the crew. "Keep an eye on them," he said to Gale. "I'm going in," He ignored Gale's warning, and said, "Shooter." A thin barrel slid next to the blade on his right hand, as though it were made to meld into it. A lens flipped over his eye from the side of his helmet, magnifying everything in sight, and he took aim on the flash of two white Peacekeeper uniforms he was unable to see with the naked eye in the distance. Two squeezes of his palm and Peeta watched as Snow's men went down without knowing what hit them. He quickly flipped onto his back and took aim when he heard oncoming footsteps, then pulled back when he noticed Gale.

"Did you get them?"

"I told you to stay...Shit!" Peeta hopped up, "Move!" He ran back towards the large bolder they had started at with Gale next to him, held his right hand towards the oncoming group of soldiers heading their way, and began firing. Within seconds Lavinia had taken out two of the dozen men coming their way, and they were joined by Justus and Crandall. The hand to hand combat his group found themselves in was a bit on the unfair side. A dozen men against five of Thirteen's soldiers who were burdened with a camera crew. Lavinia began picking off the enemy like a sniper; Gale shot his arrows, while the rest relied on rifles. Peacekeepers were dropping before they even reached them with the exception of two. One of the two met his demise with a star shaped blade buried between his eyes; the other's head was taken off with one slash of Peeta's red hot blade.

"Forward," Gale said for Justus who made a motion with his hand.

'Forward,' Peeta felt sick to his stomach as he thought, 'more like backward.' He may have been a victor, but taking lives had never been easy. Most of the soldiers he was in Two with didn't think twice about the men and women they killed, but Peeta couldn't get the image of Steven Tanner out of his mind. A man that believed in rising above what he was born into and standing up for what he believed in. 'If only the rest of you had that mentality,' he thought of the Peacekeepers he had just killed.

"Peeta," the sound of Haymitch's voice broke him free from his morbid thoughts. "Hurry up, boy. Two minutes left."

"Katniss," he grabbed the phone.

"I'm here. We have to hurry."

"I know," Peeta hated being rushed when he talked to her, but he didn't think it would matter if he had two minutes or two hours, it would never be enough time. "Close your eyes." He began speaking to her in a soft voice and ended the call the way he ended all their calls. "Now wrap your arms around yourself," he did the same and propped the phone between his ear and shoulder. "Okay...now squeeze. Can you feel me?"

"Yes," her somber voice was quiet and filled with pain.

"I'm holding you, Katniss...both of you." He ran his hands up and down his arms and imagined being comforted by her. "I'm right there with you."

"We're with you too. Right next to you...holding onto you."

"Has she moved yet?" He asked her hoping she'd say no, because the thought of missing out on something so momentous broke his heart

and simultaneously wishing she'd say yes, so he'd know the baby's growth was right on track.

"I thought it was gas...it felt like bubbles, but Regina said it was the baby moving." She paused for a second, "It's not hard enough for anyone to feel yet."

A soft sigh escaped from between his lips. "Tell her I'll be there soon and when I am, she better be ready to kick my hand," a pathetic chuckle came out of him. "God, I miss you."

"I miss you too. So much," he could hear her voice cracking, and it threatened to break him.

"Tell me something happy, Katniss. What makes you happy?"

"We're home, Peeta...back in District Twelve."

He could see it behind his closed lids. "Can you smell the cake I'm baking?"

"Brown sugar and cinnamon."

"Banana nut's asleep in her crib...her skin is so pink it's almost translucent," he added.

"I just came home from hunting...I brought you some rabbits." His chest swelled up as he tried to inhale. "You'll cook for me," Katniss said softly.

"You'll help me clean the kitchen afterward, and then we'll feed Maysee and give her a bath." he imagined a beautiful baby girl with dark hair, curled at the ends, splashing away in a tub of water. "I love the way she smells afterward."

"Mmmm," Katniss made a sniffing sound. "There's nothing like the scent of baby, is there?"

"Except maybe her mom," he smiled. "Katniss, I lo..." The line went dead. 'Love you,' he finished saying in his head and let the phone drop into his hand. He lifted his eyes and saw the red light of the camera beaming at him. "Get enough?" He said harshly to Plutarch's crew before slamming the receiver against the table and walking into the night air.

"Boy, don't go out there without..." Haymitch started.

"I need some air," Peeta snapped. "Is that okay with you? With all of you?" He glared at the film crew and turned on his heels, grateful he hadn't been armed. The horrid sense of rage began to grow within him as he stepped outside. He reached into his uniform pocket and pulled out the pen filled with a combination of morphling and proteins and shot it into his neck. The calming sensation slid through him, and Peeta hated it. The only way he'd make it through all of this was if he could somehow hold onto his anger and direct it towards the enemy. The only problem was lately; his fury had been directed at himself for volunteering to leave Thirteen. He ran his hands over his scalp and pulled his helmet on. He had been given direct instructions to keep his entire body covered while outdoors in case of enemy fire. 'Oh, Katniss,' he sighed to himself. 'I'm sorry for leaving you two. So sorry.' He closed his eyes and thought of the afternoon Gale and Haymitch found him waiting by the oak tree for Katniss.

"Hey kid," Haymitch walked carefully up to him. "We need to talk."

"Can we do it later? I'm expecting Katniss any minute now." Their days without camera crews around were their favorites. They had both decided it would be for the best if they didn't let on how far they had

come in their relationship. The feeling of sheer happiness was still so new to them that neither one of them wanted to ruin it with cameras.

"She's not coming," Gale said quietly. "Her doctor is doing some sort of test on her, and she sent me here to tell you."

Peeta gave Gale a look of suspicion. "Haymitch?" He asked for confirmation.

"Nothing's wrong with her," Haymitch told him. "I talked to the doc and asked her to keep Katniss busy for a couple of hours while we met with Coin."

"Coin?" Peeta took a careful step towards Haymitch. "What's going on?" He asked through his narrow gaze.

"She's sending Katniss on a trip to one of the districts to film a propo," Gale told him.

"No," Peeta shook his head. "That's not possible."

"It is possible and it's happening, kid." Haymitch gripped Peeta's shoulder. "She's been released from the hospital, which means she's able to hold up her Mockingjay responsibilities."

"I..." his insides were trembling. "I had a deal with her. Katniss is to stay in Thirteen."

"Yeah," Haymitch ran his hand down his face. "Heard about that deal and I believe your terms with Coin were, while you're able, you'll be going off to film the propos." Haymitch shook his head back and forth the repeated, "While you're able, kid."

"And I'm not considered able bodied because I'm still a patient," Peeta could have killed himself for his stupidity in his choice of words while

making his demands. "Are you sure she's sending her somewhere?" He asked in the hopes that he had heard them wrong.

"I was in the meeting room when it happened," Gale told him. "As soon as it was through I told Haymitch about it."

"And I went to Plutarch," Haymitch said. "That's when I found out about that deal you struck with Coin."

"So now what?" Peeta worried then answered his own question. "I need to get a medical release." He began storming back into the safety of District Thirteen's facility. "Gale, where are they sending her?"

"They mentioned One since it's been taken over by the rebels now and it was so important to the Capitol," Gale answered dejectedly.

"No," Peeta shook his head frantically. "There's no way in hell she's going anywhere. Haymitch," he glanced over his shoulder towards his mentor, "I'm going to need Regina, and we can't let Katniss find out or she'll insist on going in my place."

"Okay, kid."

"What's the plan, Peeta?" Gale asked.

"Time I flew this coop and took up my real role as the Jabberjay," he flashed Gale a glance, "don't you think?"

"'bout damn time." Gale jogged alongside of Peeta who was quickly picking up his pace. "What do you need me to do?"

"Stay out of it." Peeta hadn't meant for it to sound so rude. "Look, if Coin finds out you blabbed, she'll probably take it out on you, and Katniss would hate her even more, so trust me...stay out of it. Let me

take care of this and go do...whatever it is you're supposed to be doing."

"You sure?" Gale asked with a furrowed brow.

"Positive," Peeta answered as they all stepped into the elevator.

"Then I'm off to Special Weaponry with Beetee." Gale pushed a button on the elevator's control panel. "See you two later," he said to them when they stepped out onto the hospital ward.

Peeta wasn't too thrilled with Gale going to Special Weaponry to work, and almost reconsidered letting him tag along. "Heard about that bomb of theirs?" He asked Haymitch.

"Just what you and Katniss told me."

"Kind of makes me wonder why they need to fill that second bomb with something. Like blowing people to bits isn't enough," Peeta still wasn't too sure what to make of Gale and was seriously rethinking his relationship with his former ally.

"Why don't we deal with one problem at a time?" Haymitch suggested as they headed towards the area Regina worked in. "I'll get the doc. You wait here," Haymitch left Peeta standing in the hallway out of Katniss' line of sight then came back out with Regina in tow.

"Does she know?" Peeta asked Haymitch who shook his head from side to side. "You need to release me from medical care so I can go out and film the propos," he said to his physician.

"That's not going to happen," Regina gave him a stern look. "You're not going anywhere."

"You want Katniss to go instead?" Peeta snapped quietly. "Because that's what's going to happen now that she's not checked into the hospital, and if you try and admit her again..." Peeta shook his head, "...we both know Coin won't be too pleased with you." He let the look to her swollen stomach speak for him.

"I can't do this, Peeta," She said quietly. "The longest you've gone without a flashback is thirty-six hours."

"Considering I was having them back to back for a while there, that's pretty good, don't you think?" Peeta said trying to encourage the doctor. "You can send me with a ton of those pen needles." Beetee had created a portable device that shot Peeta's medication into his system so Katniss could carry it on her at all times. She had only had to use it once on him, and Peeta breathed out a sigh of relief afterward when he knocked on the bathroom door finding that Katniss had barricaded herself inside of it in order to stay out of his path. "Regina, they can't send her and they will. Please?" He begged and pleaded, "Please don't let Katniss and Maysee be put in a dangerous position. Release me." He could tell it was a difficult decision for the physician that had become very close to both he and Katniss, but she finally caved in and brought him a signed document declaring him medically fit for service. "Thank you," he gave her an impulsive hug. "You're a life saver."

Walking into the Command Center with Haymitch behind him, Peeta felt a sense of anger, only this one wasn't a result of Snow's hijacking, but Coin's underhandedness. "Afternoon, ma'am," Peeta walked past the guard at the door and placed his medical release in front of her. "As you can see I'm ready to go to work as your Jabberjay. My doctor put the order in the computer system this afternoon." He took a seat at the table and said, "So...what's my first job?" The twitch in Coin's jaw almost made him smile with delight until she began to speak.

"Well, soldier...since you're obviously doing better, why don't we send you where we really need you? District Two is the last..."

Peeta listened to the president and felt his insides churn. Leaving for a day or two to film a propos was one thing, but abandoning Katniss for God knows how long was another story. When Haymitch volunteered to join Peeta, he had argued with his mentor, finally letting it drop when he realized that there'd be no stopping the man from going along. "When do I leave?" Peeta asked Coin with a stiff spine.

"I see no reason to wait," she placed a call down to Beetee. "We'll need you to suit up our Jabberjay, and prepare yourself for a trip to District Two."

"Yes, ma'am," Beetee's response came over a speaker.

"Justus," she spoke to Regina's husband who had been pouring over a computerized map. "You and your team will join Peeta." She paused for a second then added, "Bring soldier Hawthorne with you. The rest of Boggs' team will be staying back unless needed." Coin faced Peeta. "Am I to assume your wife is no longer fit for duty?"

"The girl can film while she's here if you need her to," Haymitch's hand on Peeta's shoulder told him to shut up. "Probably wouldn't look too good if she went into battle now that she's showing. That Mockingjay uniform doesn't really hide that baby bump of hers."

"I take it you'll inform her of this, Haymitch?"

"Yes, ma'am." He motioned for Peeta to follow him. "We'll be on our way."

"The hovercraft will leave as soon as soldier Mellark is ready," Coin gave Plutarch and his team a deadly stare.

"We'll be on our way then too," Plutarch stood from the comfort of his seat. "Fulvia, I'll need you to stay back with Cressida and a cameraman." Peeta and Haymitch left the room while Plutarch began leaving directions for his staff.

"I need to see Katniss," Peeta was about to push the button on the elevator that would take him to the hospital.

"Kid, I would wait until you're dressed and ready to go. Otherwise there's still a chance that she'll fly off the handle and rip Coin a new one," Haymitch's warning made way too much sense.

"I won't leave here without talking to her first, Haymitch."

"I ain't leaving without saying goodbye to Effie, so that's fine. We'll go together, but let's not stir the pot too soon."

Once he was dressed and given his orders to leave, he and Haymitch raced towards the hospital, each one going their own way. "Give Effie a kiss for me," Peeta called over his shoulder. "Tell her I love her and I'll see her soon."

"Same for Katniss," Haymitch called back.

"Where the heck have you..." Katniss stopped mid-sentence. Peeta could only assume it was because she noticed he was in full uniform. "Peeta?" Her brow arched in query.

"Katniss," he rushed to her side and took her hands in his. "I have to go. Coin...she's sending me to Two."

"No. No." Katniss began pacing back and forth and shaking her head, saying the words over and over again.

"I have to," Peeta talked over her, trying his best to explain. "Two needs soldiers and I've been released from the hospital so..."

"When the hell did that happen!?" She snapped her head towards him.

"While you were in with Regina," he answered, purposely leaving out the bit about talking their doctor into it for fear that Katniss would go off on her. "Since I'm better now I ca-."

"Better?" Katniss let out a huff of laughter. "Oh yeah, and who was that punching the chair last night while I was in the bathroom?"

"I stopped though," Peeta tried to hold onto her again, but she pulled away. "Right after you shot that stuff into me and ran into the bathroom, I stopped Katniss."

"I don't care!" She screamed. "You're not well enough to go anywhere yet!"

"I am, and I'm going," he countered as gently as possible. "Do you think I want to leave you?"

"I don't know, do you?" Her accusatory tone stabbed him in the heart.

"No, I don't. But I have to." He hated himself for not telling her the reason why, but Haymitch had been right. If Peeta had told Katniss the truth, she'd storm into Coin's Command Center and demand to go in his place. "Please understand, Katniss. We both have a job to do for this rebellion and it's time I do mine."

"Do it from here." She stood with her hands on her hips. "Don't go."

"I have to," he pulled her into a hug only to have her break his heart.

*She gripped his cheeks in her hands and kissed him hard on the lips.
"Stay with me?"*

*He knew what his response was supposed to be, but he couldn't say
it. "Not this time, Katniss. I can't." He stepped away from her and
headed towards the door. "I'm sorr-"*

*"Get out!" She threw a pillow at his head. "Go if you want to leave me
so bad! Just go!"*

He gave her one last parting look and closed the door behind him.

"Wake up, kid." Haymitch shook his shoulder. "You need to come
inside. Gale figured out a way to take down the Nut."

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"What's it called?" Katniss and Effie looked over the medical files Prim
and Regina were showing them.

"P Zero X," Prim answered. "From what we can tell, it's a biological
weapon that one of the scientists here was working on. We think the
plan was to disperse it via the ventilation systems..."

"Like the smoke bombs they used during our rescue mission," Effie
thought aloud.

"Yes," Regina added, "Only this isn't going to put you to sleep. It's supposed to cause some sort of disease that would..." she gave her head a shake before continuing, "...would cause the majority of people to be stricken down with flu like symptoms, only...that's not what happened." Regina scrolled through the files showing how many people had died within a short span of time. "Somehow during testing it filtered through the air ducts here in Thirteen, and many of them were plagued with a deadly pox. Those that did survive were left sterile."

"What's this called again?" Katniss asked through questioning eyes.

"P Zero X," Prim answered.

"Take a look at this," Katniss wrote out, P 0 X on a sheet of paper and pointed to it with the tip of her pen. "Pox," she spit the word out. "What the hell were they thinking?"

"They were thinking they needed to take down their enemy," Effie answered, "and the only way a small group like Thirteen could take out the masses in the Capitol is to get them all at once."

"She's right," Regina agreed. "I don't think they wanted to kill people. I think they wanted to send in a small group and plant devices throughout the Capitol, release the gas at once, and cause them all to fall ill. The symptoms they were going for would have caused even the largest of men to be weak in the knees."

"Once their enemy was down for the count, they could have easily invaded and removed Snow from power," Effie began pacing in tiny circles. "We're all too familiar with the Games, and when do the Gamemakers attack? When the tributes least expect it. When they're weak from lack of food...sleep...water... Why, that's their favorite time to announce a feast," Effie tapped at her lip with a fingertip. "That's

what they were aiming for. Imagine, if you will, the Peacekeepers...government officials...Snow, all stricken with an illness that would, as you said Regina, bring them to their knees. How simple would it have been for the troops of Thirteen to enter and imprison their enemy? Why, they could have thrown people into cells and left them there...see who survived and offered them asylum."

Katniss' stomach started churning as she listened to Effie's probable tale. "Did they accidentally set it off here?"

"During a test run, one of the vents was left open," Prim searched through the files until she found the one that had answered all their questions. "See? It seeped through and they had to quarantine an entire section of Thirteen." She turned to Katniss, "I'm guessing it's that area you found."

"I wonder who the president was back then." Katniss asked. "I mean...I kind of got the impression that Coin has been in power for a while now."

"She wasn't in the quarantined section," Regina answered, "but her husband and daughter were." She pulled up their files. "Her daughter died almost twenty-four hours before her husband did."

Picturing Coin as a wife and mother was something Katniss had a difficult time doing. Then it struck her, "Coin probably put in the order for the testing and wound up getting her family killed in the process."

"That doesn't excuse her behavior, Katniss," Effie chided. "If anything, she should have had more mercy on you when you first got here."

"Yeah," Prim crossed her arms over her chest and agreed wholeheartedly with the woman she had once feared more than anything.

"I'm not excusing her," Katniss said disgustingly. "That woman has a few screws loose, but at least now I know why." She strolled towards a chair and said as she plopped down, "Like Beetee says...get in the mindset of your enemy."

"Don't say that too loud," Regina warned. "She has a great deal of supporters here regardless of what happened."

"Do you think they know the source of their pox?" Katniss asked.

"I think some know," Regina answered.

"Hmmm..." Effie lifted a finger, "but do they know she was the one who approved the testing?"

"I can find out," Katniss lifted her mouth in a conniving grin. "And we won't have to worry because the guy I'm thinking about asking was the first to bring up this whole pox thing to me." She thought about Dalton from district Ten, and said, "Hey Effie, you got dinner plans tonight?"

"I usually eat in my hospital room," she answered. "Why? Did you have something in mind?"

"Regina," Katniss strolled towards her doctor. "I think it's time Effie had dining hall privileges, don't you?"

"I think that's an excellent idea." Regina's smile matched Katniss'.

"Just follow me," Katniss said quietly to Effie as they carried their trays of food through the dining hall. "He's over there," she gestured with her chin towards Dalton. "Hey," Katniss plopped down next to him, Effie across, and Prim on the other side of Dalton. "Mind if we join you?"

"Of course not," he smiled at them. "Miss. Trinket, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Isn't that a nice thing to hear?" Effie said happily. "I'm afraid most people around here don't think very highly of me."

"That's crazy," Dalton assured her. "A lot of us know what you did to get Peeta out of the Capitol, and what you said during your interview with Flickerman saved many lives...takes a lot of courage to do something like that."

"Why thank you mister..."

"Call me Dalton," he stuck his hand out.

"Effie," she shook it in return.

"I was telling Effie about that..." Katniss checked to make sure no one was listening and whispered, "...pox epidemic. She's worried because I'm pregnant that something like that might happen again."

"I seriously doubt it," he answered quietly then motioned with his finger for them to lean in. "Rumor has it, one of their scientists did an experiment without authorization first and was going to be brought up on charges in front of Tribunal, but right before his trial he committed suicide. People here think he was distraught over all the damage he caused."

"Is that what *you* think?" Prim asked innocently.

"I think this district is good at keeping secrets," he answered. "But hey...what do I know? Could be I'm leery of trusting anyone after living under Snow's regime."

"Who isn't?" Katniss asked with a roll of her eyes. The rest of their meal was spent in casual conversation as they had gotten all they could out of Dalton without arousing suspicion. "Prim, go with mom and pops," Katniss noticed them standing up from one of the tables. "And don't..."

"Yeah, I know...don't tell mom." Prim gave her sister a hug goodbye. "Tell Peeta I love him when you talk to him."

Hearing her sister say the words 'I love you' so easily left Katniss feeling a bit envious. Sometimes it was like pulling teeth trying to get the words out of herself, even in the worst of times.

"Get out! She threw the first thing she could grab at Peeta as he stood in the doorway before he left for District Two. "Go if you want to leave me so bad! Just go!" When he shut the door behind him, Katniss screamed out, "You promised you wouldn't leave me!" Then she knocked over the chair she had been sitting on. "Damn you, Peeta," she cried through her anger. She leaned up against the wall of the hospital room Peeta had been staying in and squeezed her eyes shut. "How could you do this to me...to us?" She reached down and cupped her stomach. "I hate you," she mouthed and almost sobbed until the door creaked and she was getting ready to throw something else at Peeta's head. "Gale," she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to say goodbye. I'm off to Two." He eyed her up. "Do I need to duck here, Catnip?"

She looked down at her hand clutching a plastic container full of cotton balls. "Oh...uh, I thought you were Peeta." She set the jar back on the counter.

"Do you always look like you're going to hurl something at his head? Or was that just for my benefit?" He gave her a boyish smile.

"Shut up," she wiped a hand under her nose. "So you're going to Two, huh?"

"Yeah. Guess Coin figured out I was the one that told Haymitch and Peeta about your mission since the rest of my unit is staying behind." Gale walked towards her, "Well, I should go. I'm running late as it is and..."

*"What do you mean **my** mission?" Katniss picked up on what she was sure Gale wasn't supposed to mention. "Was it me? Was I the one that was supposed to go?"*

"Hey, look..." Gale flustered, "...I don't want to get in the middle of this thing."

"Oh my God, that's it, isn't it?" It was the only reason she could think of that Peeta would have been released from medical care. "Regina," came out in a low growl. "Where is she?"

"Okay...well, see ya, Catnip," Gale turned and headed down the hall.

"Wait!" Katniss ran the few steps after him, and threw her arms around him. "Watch him for me, Gale. And take care of yourself too, okay?"

"I will. You take care of..." he glanced down and let out a small chuckle, "...that thing that's taken over your body."

"Oh, shut up," she gave his arm a soft slug. "Bye."

"Bye, Catnip."

She stood in the hallway and watched as Gale's back disappeared, and a camera crew rounded the corner. She let out a disgusted grunt and knew she had to find her doctor before they caught up with her. "You," she pointed at Regina. "You released him when you knew..."

"Come here, Katniss." Regina dragged her by the arm into an empty room away from the camera that was quickly barreling towards them. "Don't you dare point a finger at me. Do you think it was easy for me to do such a thing? Do you think I'm thrilled with this? My husband is on that hovercraft right next to yours, so don't you dare come in here and start accusing me of anything without knowing the entire story."

"Justus got sent?" Katniss knew what that meant. "Lavinia's gone too, huh?"

"Yes," Regina said with a shaky voice and strong jaw. "I'm sure anyone we care about is on that damn hovercraft, including Haymitch."

"Why would she do this?" Katniss didn't need to say Coin's name for Regina to understand.

"Because she needs to win a war," Regina said on a heavy sigh. "It was either you or Peeta, Katniss. How could I have allowed you to leave Thirteen knowing what might be out there waiting for you?" She gave Katniss a look of sorrow. "At least your daughter is safe. That's all he wanted, Katniss. Was to make sure you and the baby stayed safe."

It took her a second to come to her senses, but when she did, Katniss turned on her heels and started to run towards the Hangar hoping that she'd make it there before Peeta's craft lifted off.

"Katniss look here," Effie pointed to a passage in one of the history books she was reading, pulling Katniss from her reverie. "This books talks about presidential elections."

Effie's last two words peaked Katniss' interest. "Elections?"

"Yes," Effie answered and sat next to Katniss on the hospital bed. "Apparently they had a system known as electoral votes, which made absolutely no sense to me," Effie said with a slight wave of the hand. "Then it was changed to a majority vote. People from the nation would enter in their choice for a leader once every six years. It used to be four, but they changed that too," Effie said offhandedly. "I wonder how President Coin feels about this electoral process."

"I wonder if that's why no one here has ever seen these books." Katniss said, and then wished Effie a goodnight before sneaking down to the quarters she set up for her and Peeta.

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"Come on...come on..." Katniss was tapping her foot and pushing the elevator's button over and over again. "Move it!" The second the doors opened she jumped inside, not caring in the least that she was being filmed and pounded her fist into the button that would take her to the Hangar. "Please don't be gone yet," she chanted over and over to herself as the elevator moved at a snail's pace.

The walls of the hovercraft felt like they were closing in on Peeta. It reminded him too much of the crafts that he had ridden on with Portia before going into the catacombs and being sent into the arena. As if on cue he heard a voice say, "Are you ready, Peeta?"

"Huh?" He looked around to see who was talking, but everyone had been in their own little conversations leaving him to his thoughts.

Then he heard it again, only this time it was Portia and she was standing in his room at the Capitol before the first Games, "Are you ready, Peeta?"

"I didn't tell her," Peeta mumbled to himself. "I didn't tell her," he said louder with fear in his eyes. "I...I need to get off," He unbuckled his seatbelt and made for the closed door of the hovercraft. "Let me off!"

"Peeta, you must sit down," Plutarch spoke firmly to him as the craft began to roll.

"No! Nooooo!" He pounded on the door.

"Are we sure he's all right?" Plutarch asked Haymitch.

"What's wrong boy?" Haymitch got up and tried to usher Peeta back to his seat.

"Please, Haymitch. I didn't tell her...I have to tell her," his heart was pounding a mile a minute. "Please?" He begged.

"Hurry...Hurry," Katniss' legs were shaking as she bit nervously at her bottom lip. She lifted her hands to her face and brushed away the tears that had been silently falling from her eyes, damning herself for being so stupid and letting Peeta walk out of the hospital thinking she was mad at him.

"I swear Plutarch, you stop this craft and you'll get one hell of a propos out of it," Peeta had no choice but to use the cameras to his advantage.

The excited quirk of the former Gamemakers' brow sent a thrill through Peeta, as did his order to the pilot, "Stop the hovercraft." Plutarch faced Peeta and said, "You've only got a few minutes so I suggest you hurry..." the steps let out into the Hangar and Peeta took off. "Follow him," Plutarch yelled at his cameramen.

"Katniss. Katniss." Peeta said her name with each footfall against the hard tarmac, rushing towards the elevator. "Come on...please hurry." He pushed the button over and over again, and then said, "I'm taking the stairs!" He made long strides down the hall and then the sound of his name had him stopping just short of the doorway. "Katniss," he breathed out her name and turned to find her standing on the opposite end of the corridor.

"Peeta," she called to him and raced as fast as her feet would take her into his arms.

"Katniss," He scooped her up and flattened his lips against hers. "I love you, Katniss. I love you."

"I love you too," she pressed her lips against his in a frantic kiss. "I love you so much."

"I had to tell you," he spoke between frenzied lips.

"Me too. I'm so..." She tried to say she was sorry, but his mouth captured hers and his hand held her head in place.

Their hurried kiss slowed down. Their arms wrapped around each other's bodies. Heads tilted to the side as they both opened their eyes to take in as much as they could with what little time they had.

"I love you," he pulled slightly away from her. "I am so in love with you."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that again," She pulled him close to her. "Peeta, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"Shh," he ran his hand down the back of her head. "I know why you did."

"And I know why you're going," she said with sorrow in her eyes, and then dropped her head. When she lifted her face to his there were no more tears. Being strong was what he needed.

The second Katniss lifted her eyes to his; he could see the fire inside of them. "That's my girl," he cupped her cheeks and pressed a hard kiss against her lips. "That's my girl." He gripped her tightly to his chest. "You make sure to stay busy."

"I will, and you stay alive," She pressed a kiss into his ear. "Come back to us, okay?"

"Just try and stop me," he gave her another kiss before telling her, "When I get back...we're going to make it official again. Just you and me."

"Just you and me," Katniss said with a nod. "Mr. and Mrs. Mellark."

"Gotta go, boy!" Haymitch's bellow called to them.

"I've got to go," he kissed her again.

"Tell Plutarch he better let you make calls to me," Katniss held her hand out to him...their fingertips were barely touching. "Wait," she moved closer to him and pressed her hand against his heart.

They both knew the camera was filming them, yet neither of them gave a damn.

"One," he mouthed and ran her braid through his hand.

"Two," she mouthed back and held her chin high with pride as his heartbeat sang to her.

"Three," their free hands moved downward...their fingers linked together over their child in an unbreakable bond.

"I love you," she mouthed.

"I love you," he mouthed back. "Both of you, more than you'll ever know." He placed a soft, lingering kiss against her lips.

She gave him a nod and took a painstaking step backwards.

He nodded back and turned heading straight for the waiting hovercraft.

One camera filmed Katniss watching Peeta leave with a great deal of pride in her stance, but what it didn't see was the emotional turmoil inside her heart.

Another camera captured Peeta as he stood next to a tiny window inside of the departing hovercraft with his palm flattened against it, staring at his wife and child. "I love you," he mouthed to her once more and hoped she would continue to feel his love from across the nation.